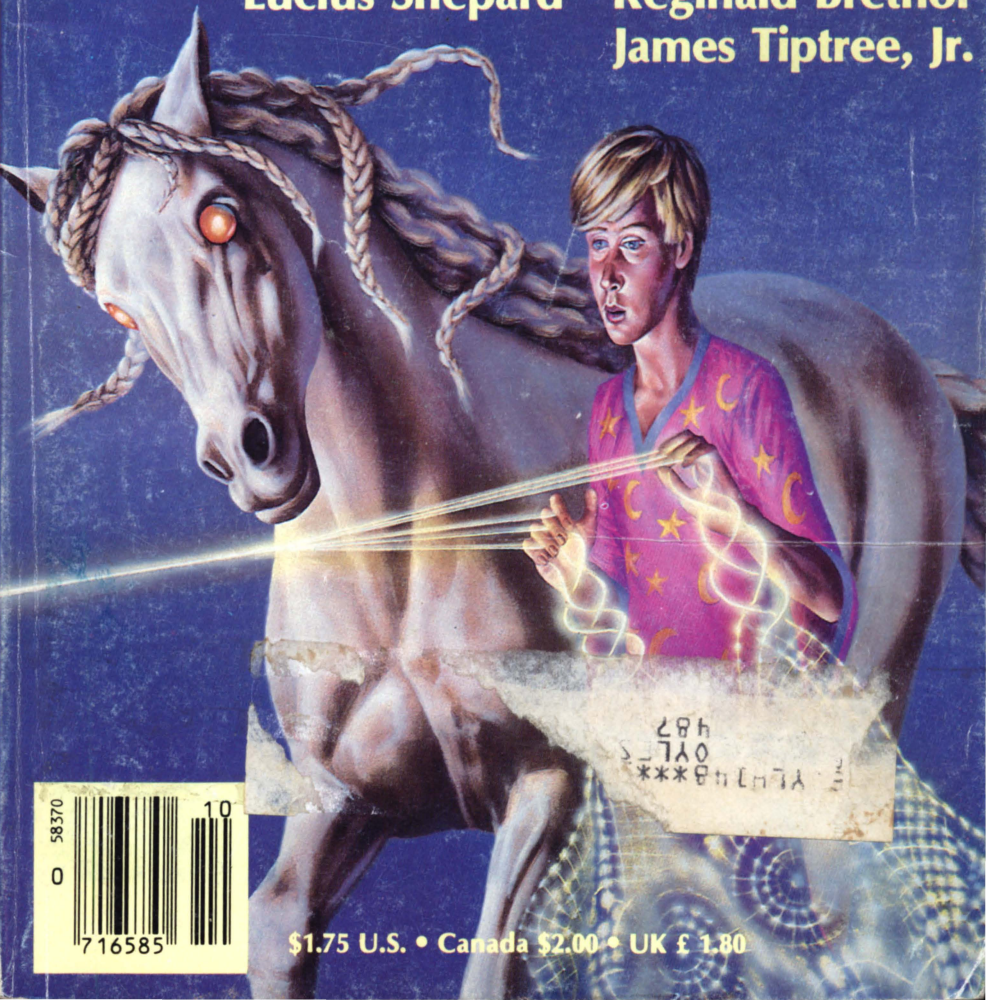


37th Anniversary Issue

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OCTOBER


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*James Tiptree's last story here was "Good Night, Sweethearts" (March 1986). Here is something completely different, in which the Devil makes a condolence call to the Heavenly City and offers a most remarkable deal . . .*

# Our Resident Djinn

BY

JAMES TIPTREE, Jr.

**W**hen God died, the Devil survived him a while.

The obsequies were impressive, and not unduly long. Out of respect for his old Adversary, Satan ordered that the more flamboyant fires of Hell be banked, and the noisiest sinners muffled; he also decreed a half-holiday for senior staff — a purely arbitrary usage of antiquity, since Hell has neither night nor day.

As the last elegiac choirs of cherubim faded through the empyrean, so clear as to be heard even in Hell, Lucifer felt an odd disquiet in his brazen heart. It was almost as though some unaccountable new responsibility had fallen to him. Clearly, things were entering a new epoch.

Might it not be fitting, now that it was presumably possible, for him to pay his last respects in person?

But the flight upward would be a

long one. He had come down express, but even so, morn had changed to noon, and noon to dewy eve, en route. He shuddered, causing a small thunderclap, as he recalled how his once-snowy pinions had changed to ebon batwings, his feet to taloned hooves, and his bright angelic features to the grim (but, he always considered, distinguished) features he now bore, as he fell. A long way. . . . And he was older now.

Surely it would be only sensible to have a medical checkup first?

He whistled up a posse of work-goblins to scour the pits for viable physicians, and leaned upon a forward battlement of his dread castle to wait.

High above the Purgatorial Plain, the view always soothed him. Here and there through the middle distance sparkled the flares of volcanic

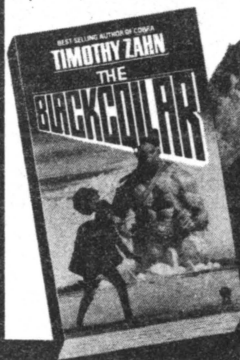
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blowholes, from which fiery rivers of blood and molten metal ran hissing to the Sea of Torment. Charred barracks and camps for the lower order of fiends marked the ashy plain, while behind all towered the black abutments of the Mountains of Hell, each with its special horror. And looming above the center of the range, he had had the fancy to install a great snow-clad peak, where he could arrange suitable punishments for those exceptional sinners who could endure heat. Its topmost spires were lost in the low-hanging gray clouds that scudded perpetually, mockingly, above the parching plain.

In the foreground of this spectacular view yawned the Pit of Hell proper, whose seven levels had been besung by poets. From sentiment, Satan hadn't changed things there much of recent centuries. Down below the seventh level lay the fearful Gulf of Silence. Not even he knew what was in its deeps. Every now and then he would cause some especially vociferous evildoer to be flung down there, and listen attentively to the long-dwindling ululations. But none ever returned to tell about it, nor did anything else emerge.

Lucifer occasionally contemplated devising some chain of bodies by which the gulf might be plumbed, but he had as usual been kept too busy with the interminable adjudications and squabbings of the hierarchy of Hell.

Once, one of the modern breed of scientists, condemned to a short stay for excessive media exposure, had said that it might be a black hole in the making, since energy and matter here conformed to other laws; but he overestimated the Satanic attention span, and was himself pitched in before he'd worked out half his theory. Remembering this, Lucifer leaned far out, to send his dark gaze into the darker depths. Might this be a gateway through which some new phenomena appropriate to this new age would come? But darkness met only darkness, with no change so far as he could tell. . . . Or were there the faintest strange phosphorescent gleamings, as of something in slow stir deep down there? He stared his hardest, still unable to be sure.

And the doctors were now arriving, a tatterdemalion band of butchers-turned-surgeons, of pricked pomposities and singed Feelgoods, all yapped and nipped on by the younger trolls. Lucifer turned and raked them with his terrible orbs, opening for the occasion his third one, which sees only fact. He thus detected one doctor whose qualifications were genuine — a sorry wight who had come under ecclesiastical displeasure for some forgotten crime, such as administering anesthetic to women in childbirth. When Satan explained what was wanted, this man left off his groaning and agreed that a checkup was a sound idea. But he

held up the stumps that were all that the Holy Office had left of his erring hands.

"You shall have them back — when I return safely," Satan told him; the flare of desperate hope in the man's eyes made the goblins snicker.

"The heart would be your problem," the doctor said. "But, er, Your Majesty — do you have one?"

"I do," snapped Satan. "Examine it instanter!"

So instruments were described, and devised by Hell's smiths and artisans, and the doctor went to work. Although he had a little difficulty in persuading the Lord of Hell to submit to a stress test — several bystanding demons were inadvertently incinerated — everything proved out satisfactorily, and soon his mighty patient was pronounced fit for an extended upward flight.

"Your respiratory-vascular systems are as sound as a young tiger's," the doctor told Satan. "But even so, I cannot guarantee against the effects of, er, psychic trauma. Stresses of, ah, supernatural origin, such —"

"You take care of the flapping, and I'll take care of the flaps," Satan replied, and waved them all back to their respective torments. Noting that some of his higher-ranking subordinates seemed to be evincing an undue cheer, he gave them all a short but pungent lecture on the folly of ambition in Hell. Then he strode to his tower for takeoff, the imps he had

delegated to put up refreshments scampering in his wake with the pack.

Comfortably reassured and provisioned, Lucifer launched himself upward on his great black wings, and was soon riding the massive thermals of Hell, circling ever higher above his domains. Only he knew which of the tiny flecks of lesser darkness contained the promise of true light above.

As the smog thickened below him, and the faint glow of the sky slowly brightened around, he found himself in a sphere where there seemed neither up nor down, nor anything to mark his way. The thermals faded out. Disorienting; but his instincts guided him true, and he knew that he would soon emerge.

But as his powerful wingbeats carried higher, he could not help but wonder what his reception would be, and whether all that he assumed was so. That God was dead, or at least seriously disabled, he knew; if only because he had been able to lay hands, or claws, upon the distraught messenger. The poor celestial was so overcome that he could only squeal helplessly as he was taken, and the Devil himself had been so surprised that instead of subjecting the messenger to agonies sure to wring the truth from him, he had contented himself with jerking out a fistful of wing feathers before he let him go, still shrieking futilely for divine Help. By

this, Satan was quite sure of the truth of his message, for had his Opponent yet lived, even a failed attempt on His minion would have brought pyrotechnic displays of His displeasure.

But what else went on up there?

Odd things had happened before. Take the whole business of the Son and his fate. Flapping steadily, Satan shook his head; the metaphysics of all that had been too much for his pragmatic mind. The Father of a virgin's son? The Crucifixion as a triumph? And the whole Resurrection hoopla — *Nole me tangere*, now-you-see-it-now-you-don't — Either you're resurrected or you're not, was Satan's opinion.

He respected the man Jesus as a sincere fanatic — he himself had made a tiring, good-faith effort at the Temptation; but the rest was all too much. To Satan, it smelled of the devices graybeards will use to conceal their impotence. Was something more in this line going on up there? Would he arrive to find some cockamammy Reincarnation, perhaps, in league with a borrowed diety? That Vishnu chap, for instance, had some vitality left. Omniscience can change to nulliscience, or omnisenility; he hoped he wasn't spending all this effort to meet with some metaphysical rodomontade. Almost, he turned back.

But then the sky cleared abruptly, and his misgivings vanished as he saw a familiar marker. He was passing it from below this time, but he knew

what it read: ALL HOPE ABANDON YE WHO ENTER HERE. It was about when he fell past this that the last of his halo had gone skittering away lightless in a scorching blast from Hell. Death, what a day that had been!

Now he took a quick scan about, just to make sure that all was in order, and no guardians who hadn't got the Word were there to contend his way. All clear.

He continued mounting upward under the cool sun of Heaven. It beamed from the bluest of blue skies, set with tiny pearly clouds. Far below, a faint smudge concealed his own immense dominions, but no sulfuric scent of them reached here to comfort his nose. How quickly he had come! Was he much stronger than he'd believed, or had Space itself shrunk? Who could say?

And yes, high under the celestial vault, he could now make out a shining, a thickening island of something more than cloud. Why, Heaven itself was in view — he had already come halfway! It was definitely time for a snack.

A little cloudlet was passing him. "*Like to like in the empty air*," he told it. "*The Lord of Matter desires a chair*." A gesture, and the thing condensed gratifyingly into a sumptuous airborne couch. Things had changed, all right, he told himself. No simple black spell would function here if his Enemy still lived.

He found that the imps had packed



a proper lunch, for once. A hearty sandwich of broiled liars' tongues (in which one of the smallest imps seemed to have become entrapped, so that he had to pluck it out and fling it away screeching. Little cannibals!) And a flask of raped virgins' tears, yes — and some pickled bikers' parts, a nice contemporary touch. He must remember to commend them on his return, he thought, munching pleasurably. Perhaps they'd like a plump politician all to themselves to torment? Gratitude was, of course, unheard of in Hell; but a good administrator knows how to keep the help functioning.

Lifting the flask of tears, he reflected that he had indeed passed his point of no return: it was the sight of the Heavenly City that marked the limits of his banishment. Well, he would see it again now, the place he had so nearly come to rule, and where he had refused to serve. Not for an instant had he regretted his choice; but now an odd melancholy, almost a nostalgia, stole into his mood.

Away with it! He must be growing chilled; he'd forgotten how blessed cold it was up here. "*Fire! Your prince commands you, glow! My resting place alluming. Come warm me for an hour or so — but burn without consuming.*" And at his cabalistic sign, a border of flame like Elmo's Fire sprang out around the couch and himself, creating a cozy little inferno.

He finished his repast in a cheerier

mood, then rose and grandly stretched his fiery form. As he turned, he noticed that he'd left quite a mess; a wave of the hand abolished it. No need to act like an orc! And with a mighty wing buffet to the air, he was on his way upward again, his eyes on the growing splendor above.

In what seemed a very short time, the flame-edged shadow of his dark wings fell upon the drawbridge leading to the Gates of the City. The bridge was down; the great gates stood ajar. No one was in sight.

As he hovered in for landing, a figure whom he recognized as Peter rose sleepily from the flowery greensward beside the Gates.

"Avast!" cried Peter, rubbing his eyes. "Away with ye, black scum! What do ye here? — Oh, sorry," Peter interrupted himself. "For a moment I f-forgot." And the poor Saint looked so woebegone that Satan checked his retort.

"Well, so you've come, too — you might as well come in." But when Peter went to push the Gates wider, the task seemed so far beyond his strength that Lucifer gave him a hand, being careful not to scorch the beautiful pearl work.

"Did you not receive my condolences?" he asked.

"Oh yes — I meant to tell you. We *did* appreciate your note. And the lovely wrought flowers. Of course the wreath *was* a little warm" — here Peter glanced at a burn mark on his

palm — “we had to quench it a little first. But it’s nice to know folks stick together at times like these.”

The Devil chuckled deep in his throat. “Just thought I’d come up and see how you all were fixed.” Then, as the full view of the Heavenly City opened to him, he halted.

“My word! It — it certainly has held up well! You’ve done a splendid job of maintenance; can’t have been easy. . . . It’s been so long; but don’t I see a few new features? Additions and enhancements?”

“Oh yes.” Peter revived a bit. “One must keep up with the centuries; you know. And we get so many fine artists up here. Although, I must confess, some of the very recent stuff — Ah well, I’m no art critic.”

“I thought I recognized that Calder.” Satan pointed to a vast luminous mobile. “But that one, frankly —” He indicated a giant cow’s skull against a blue sky.

“An original O’Keefe,” Peter said, a trifle smugly. “She went right into production. . . . Would you care to have me show you about?”

“I would indeed,” Satan replied. “But where are all your people? I should have thought you’d be quite crowded with the Blessed by now.”

“Oh, everyone’s gone for the day. Uriel — he’s so practical — he decided they had to do something to lift the atmosphere. So he and Rafe and the rest organized a picnic excursion to the Elysian Fields. Some of the old

shades can still talk a bit, you know. It’s very interesting. So they’ve all gone — that is, the ones who still have enough individuality left.”

“Individuality? How do you mean?”

“Don’t you find that? Oh well, it’s that so many of ours seem to just melt away into grand abstraction, after a time. I expect it’s the pure air, or something. And with all that singing, too, Don’t yours? In an, ah, reverse sense, as it were?”

“No, I can’t say they do. Mine stay all too identifiable. Although, now that you mention it, I do seem to have noticed a rather shapeless vortex developing around one or two of my chaps. Fellow named Hinckel, or Hittle. Or was it Nickerson? Or Failwell?”

Peter nodded. “That’s how it starts. And then more and more get sucked in till you get a kind of critical mass, and blooie! — there’s nothing left but radiance.”

“In this case it’d be more like a bad smell, I imagine,” Lucifer commented. “But seriously, perhaps we have less merging because they’re so many different ways to sin, but only one way to, ah, enter here?”

“That could be it!” exclaimed Peter; he seemed quite happy now. Peter loved a good theological argument, Satan remembered. “Although it has been said that evil is monotone. But, come, I must show you the new *son et lumière*. I never can pronounce that right. It’s all computerized,” he

added with shy pride. "And that's our sports palace."

They were strolling by an impressive amphitheater. Satan could see the scoreboard rising above the stands, but the format puzzled him—it seemed to show nothing but winners.

"Oh, it wouldn't do to have people lose," Peter told him. "The aim is to achieve a perfect draw at the highest possible score. You'd be surprised what a thrilling game we have, when each team has to help the other avoid a win."

"I would indeed," Lucifer agreed politely. And then they fell silent, for they were entering the Avenue of the Blessed, the grand colonnade from which risen spirits had their first view of the Divine Radiance. It was still radiant, and as they proceeded along, Lucifer was quite touched to see that the old barbaric Throne was still quite visible under the Renaissance splendors. Despite that foreknowledge, it gave him a jolt when he raised his gaze and perceived that Throne and dais were completely empty.

"Watch." Peter whistled, and a passive dove alighted on his hand. The Saint pressed what seemed to be a small set of buttons on the dove's breast. At once the radiance increased ten fold, in a great upspringing fanwork of colored lights, which seemed to elevate dais and all into a sunrise of coruscating brilliance, wheeling

and changing as they watched, until the mind was quite bewildered. At the same time, music played, now sinking to a murmur, now rising in crescendo — a totally stunning effect.

"Marvelous!" the Devil murmured. "Bravo!"

"If only you could have seen it when — when — " But the poor Saint broke down weeping and could not continue. Satan turned away considerately, and found his own throat constricted. The nostalgia that had touched him earlier was back again, stronger than before. It all seemed such a shame. Why couldn't things have gone on for a respectable eternity?

Instead of asking the questions he had intended, having to do with the details of the Lord's demise and the complications of the Trinity, he found himself saying consolingly, "There, there, old friend. Always remember what a splendid career was his, starting from a simple nomadic desert diety."

"Y-yes, that's t-true," sobbed Peter. "You must forgive me." It's just that — Ohhh." And he wept again briefly.

"No need," said the Devil gruffly. "I assure you, I sympathize." Then, seeing that the old Saint seemed quite disoriented, he asked in gentle tones, "But tell me, what are you going to do with all of this?"

Peter gulped and blew his nose.



"Well, at first we were just intending to maintain it as it is. After all, there is always the p-possibility that — the p-p-possibility — forgive me. Yes, maintain it as it is. . . . But since then some of the higher-ups have had word that the space is going to be needed. We don't know what for. But after all, we have had the lion's share, so to speak, so perhaps it's fair. So we're having a kind of, a greensward sale, you might say.

"The Allah people have a bid in for the sound system — they do a lot of praying, and it seems they're having quite a revival." He nodded. "Yes, and they want some of the plantings, too. They *are* quite fond of flowers, I believe. And there's a Shinto sect who's asking for time; I think they're interested in the topiary. And of course the pavements; *that's* no problem. But all the rest — and the — Oh, I don't *know* what we shall do; it all seems so horrid — and some of the Cherubim are quite incapable of maintaining themselves in any other environment —" And he all but broke down again.

Satan noticed that, moved by the old Saint's grief, he had absently clawed a divot from the flowery turf. He replaced it carefully, considering.

"It does seem a dreadful shame to have it all broken up," he said. "Let's see; I have some figures in my head. . . . But how much is a cubit, in metric? No matter — I know it'll do. Look, my old friend, it happens that I

have a lot of spare room in my fore grounds. Not that there's been any shortage of sinners. But do you recall the Doctrine of Infant Damnation? Well, I had to set up a vast sort of nursery area for *that* — and then, thank, ah, Fate, they discontinued it. So I have some very nice real estate; quite vacant, not too hot at all, and the air has nothing wrong with it that a good set of scrubbers wouldn't fix. But the thing is, what with the current cost of energy and the ridiculously inflated prices of temptations, my cash-flow position isn't too good. I couldn't begin to pay you —"

"Oh my goodness," Peter interrupted him. "The *price* isn't the problem at all. Why, we'd *give* it to someone who'd keep it all together!"

"Well, now, that was what I rather hoped. And I do have an abundance of labor, if they can keep their smudgy little hands where they belong." For an instant he looked quite fierce, and his tail lashed. "What I'm getting at is that if your people agreed, we could ship this whole thing down and set it up very attractively, just as if it'd never been moved. Certain elements of the *view* outside might not be quite right; but don't I recall something about the Blessed regaling themselves by looking over the wall and watching the damned fry, wasn't it?"

"Oh yes, in primitive times — very primitive," said the Saint hastily. "But this is really splendid! Do you actually mean you would? I'm just sure the

Powers and Dominions would be *de-lighted*. They've been quite broken up about the sale. Oh, I can't tell you what this would mean!"

"And you could all come down for long visits, and check on our maintenance."

"Oh yes — Oh, I'm quite sure—"

"Of course," said the Devil thoughtfully, "there may be some of the newly Blessed who will be a bit confused by finding themselves headed downward, to Hell."

"You don't mean those evangelic chaps? We aren't expecting them."

"*You* may not be," said Satan with relish. "No, I was thinking of the people you normally get. Perhaps if we made it clear that it's more of a museum — no, that wouldn't do, either. Oh well, you'll think of something."

"Yes, I'm sure we will." Peter was almost happy now.

"By the way," Satan inquired as they turned away and the far-off light show rolled to its finale, "what's that curious area near the Throne, where the light seems so — so —"

"I know what you mean," Peter responded. "Don't you recall? That was the Holy Virgin's place. And the Magdalen's. But things there have been undergoing some very puzzling changes lately. I mean, they *had* been, before — b-before —"

"There, there," said Satan. "Don't tear yourself apart, old comrade. After all, we've got one major problem

solved. And I have a hunch what might be going on in the ladies' quarter — we've had a few problems ourselves. . . .

"But to return to practical matters: Let's see," he added thoughtfully. "If all goes well, my boys could start as soon as you give the word. But don't you think someone should stay on permanent duty to handle Admissions? And have you decided what to do about the Book — or have you automated that, too?"

"Oh goodness, no!" said the old Saint emphatically. "Or rather, yes! — We tried it. Now that almost everyone has numbers, it seemed quite promising. So we had one installed for testing — just a few million names at first. And there *were* a few little — is 'bugs' the word? — to unravel, things that would have been simple for any mere Angel. Such as a person having more than one social security number. Would you believe we found one Saintly lady with seventeen? She'd been feeding half a township. And, conversely, numbers that were attached to more than one name — several writers and, ah, show-biz people had dozens. But we soon got those ironed out. And in the process we discovered that quite a number of our very youngest people seemed to be most adept at such devices. So we organized them into record-keeping squads. They did seem to be delighted to have an alternative to making music, you know. And things were won-

derfully restful for me — for a while.” He smiled reminiscently.

“But I gather something happened?”

“Well, yes. . . . We began receiving the most surprising people. There seemed to be a rash of petty disasters on Earth, theater fires and so on; and I recall we got the entire complement of the Takewara Japanese girls’ volleyball team. That was no great problem — but then we received the whole staff and inmates of a women’s correctional facility near Tehachapi, California. And then — are you familiar with an institution called the Pentagon, in the United States?”

“I am.” Satan licked his lips.

“Well, it seemed that our, ah, computer had somehow made contact with *its* personnel records, as well as other data, and the most extraordinary things began to go wrong. It turned out that our young geniuses had grown a bit, ah, restless. And the next thing we knew, one of our most revered archdioceses was under congressional investigation. . . .” He sighed. “In the end we had to scrub the whole thing and go back to our old hand methods.”

“I see,” nodded Satan. “Well, I’m glad to know all this. I believe it might account for a period of confusion that plagued us, too.”

“You did? Oh dear — yes, that might well be it. Our sincere apologies. . . . And now —” he waved toward the open Gates — “here come

our returning picnickers. I do hope the outing cheered them!”

A radiant procession of the Blessed was advancing across the outer bridge, guided by corps of Seraphim and Celestial Girl Scouts. Behind them could be glimpsed a wild confusion of wings, as swan boats, riding griffins, hippogriffs, and other workcreatures of the air disentangled themselves from their Heavenly harnesses. In the rear were the Archangelic Presences, Michael in the lead.

“They do seem a little more normal,” Peter observed as the strum of many harps began to tingle the air. “Now to communicate your wonderful offer. Oy! Sirs! Lord Michael, look who’s here!”

The great Angel turned his face toward them, and they saw his features change as he recognized the visitor.

“He came to pay his respects,” Peter explained hastily. “and he’s thought of the most marvelous plan —”

“I have heard of your plans before, sir,” commented Michael stiffly. But the others gathered round, prepared to listen.

“It concerns the disposition of your — of all this wonderful creation,” Satan gestured. “Peter tells me you’re thinking of letting it go piecemeal, and the thought gives me much pain.” As he went on to explain his proposal, he found that he felt quite strongly about it — so much so that



he thought of another argument. "And after all," he wound up, "think of your future incoming clientele! They can't just be left to wander between worlds, can they? Who knows where they'd end up?"

"That's a point, Mike," Raphael said. "I hear that Valhalla is resuming limited operations."

"H'mm," said the great Archangel, no longer so hostile. "But still, what, when they enter and find the Throne—as it is?"

"Well, I do have a suggestion there, though it's more in my line than yours. Some of my younger succubi are splendid girls; if I clean them up, they'd look really quite acceptable. I could have the best of them put it about among the Blessed, while they waited *outside*, of course, that He is on a difficult Creation job and got tied up. Such rumors spread fast and would satisfy people. In fact, they'd be pleased with a little inside information, as it were. It's the not knowing. And afterward — well, maybe most of them will go abstract, or whatever. And perhaps some of your artists could contrive something with that son et lumière dingus—"

Some of the younger angels gasped at that, and Michael said haughtily, "As you say, that is more in your line than ours," But Uriel, the practical one, nodded. "Really, Mike, this might allay a great deal of natural anxiety."

"And perhaps — " murmured Gabriel, fingering his Trump, "I know I

sound foolishly optimistic, but, well, perhaps. A Return? And *then* think how awful it would be if we'd—"

Michael nodded again, and sighed a grave assent. And so it was decided.

As they walked toward the Gates, Lucifer was reminded of something. "I couldn't help noticing," he remarked, shooting a glance at Peter, "that the area outside is remarkably lush and pretty. But the ground beyond your walls in my domain would be, I fear, quite dark and bare at best. Not favorable for photosynthesis. So what do you say if I order up a platoon of fire-elementals — they've been shockingly idle lately — and have them station themselves along the outer crevices in the wall? That would give quite enough light to grow things, especially if someone went round now and again to remind them forcefully of their duties. They haven't a brain among them, and it would be a nice, suitable job. With a very attractive end result. What do you say? Of course I wouldn't think of stationing any of my personnel in actual contact without your assent."

"Nicely put," remarked Raphael. "I think it's a very good idea; we certainly don't want the City just sitting on a blasted plain."

"So then we're agreed!" exclaimed Satan, feeling remarkably elated. He stepped to the Gate, inhaling mightily. "I'll have the first work crews up here before you know it. And of course I'll be with them to oversee

everything. . . . Do I take it that you'd like the walls carried down first, so there'll be an enclosure all set up and waiting for — for the more delicate artifacts? I imagine you can guard the perimeter yourselves for the short time required?"

"Oh, we will!" chorused a Seraphic band.

"How do you plan to move the whole walls?" Uriel asked curiously.

"Work-dragons. Under proper control, they can cut out a portion at a time as neat as you please, and fly it down. Of course, getting it back up here would be a different story." Satan chuckled genially. "But even so, we could probably come up with something," he added as he saw a shadow cross a couple of Angelic visages. "Well!" He spread his huge black wings, stepping to the sill. "D'you know, it feels fine to have a project again! Maybe I could persuade you all to help, by selecting and gathering your favorite flower seeds, for instance." Daring, he added confidently, "You know what they say about the Devil and idle hands!"

It seemed to go down well; several older Angels chuckled. And with a "Farewell, all!" he was off in a great leap through the pearly little clouds.

"I hope we've done the right thing," said Gabe, the worrier.

"Think of the alternative," Uriel observed. They all sighed. And as they turned to go back in, Raphael was heard to mutter, "All those Mos-

lems mucking about with my Exbury azaleas. . . . I just hope the dragons are careful."

"They will be, I'm sure," said Peter.

Lucifer's great leap outward carried him to a part of the sky where the cloudlets were few. He was feeling remarkably well, and, reminding himself that the way home was all downhill, he decided it would be pleasant to make one last flight upward, to where he could view all Heaven from above. *His* Heaven now, he reflected as he soared. Had he been crazy, offering them all free refuge in his domain? There would be problems, of course. . . . Really, the times were growing so strange that he could scarcely trust his own motives. . . . But surely some solid evil would come of this. His old instincts for mischief were still strong.

"If you can't beat 'em and you can't join 'em — outlive 'em!" He chuckled in his old, nasty way, melting a small rainbow that had come too near.

He mounted steadily, until, seeing a solid-looking anvil cloud above, he zoomed up over it and landed on the rim.

Ah yes — indeed a superb vista! The glorious golden glitter of the thoroughfares, the jeweled parks, and the great profusion of splendid mansions, from large to small, in the residential sections.

He lost himself for a moment in the sheer magic of contemplation. Then he began recasting his earlier estimates, to make sure everything could be suitably installed, with enough terrain to set it off becomingly. He'd have to accommodate waiters at the Gate, too — Peter had told him there was quite a queue in times of war or natural disasters. . . . The idea of poor old Peter handling a computer bank distracted him by its comicality. But there was a warning in it, too, in case he himself were ever tempted to automate.

Yes, there would be room enough and to spare, he concluded. He owed that to that mathematician-wallah who had calculated and impressed exponential birthrates on him. He had cleared his infant-reception area on the fellow's figures. . . . Maybe he'd have him sent a cup of water, no matter what his staff thought of that. They'd soon see his trip to Heaven hadn't made him soft!

"What are you doing in my nursery?"

The clear little voice behind him startled him so that he had to shoot out his pinions for balance as he whirled.

A naked girl-child stood staring at him, quite incuriously, Satan saw. What was this, one of the Blessed who'd lost her way home?

But no; she wore no halo — and needed none, for she was radiant all over. And the cold serenity of her

smile, the icy chill in her light gray eyes, told him that he looked on something quite other than any mere celestial spirit.

"You'll have to speak louder," the child said, although he hadn't spoken. "I'm nearly deaf. . . . You're one of my old dreams, aren't you? Have they told you you'll have to move? All this is to be mine soon, you know. As soon as I'm completely deaf — and a few other things."

"My apologies; I didn't mean to intrude." Lucifer fairly shouted, so that the cloud began to resonate worryingly. "This is your nursery, you say?"

"Yes. But I'm growing very fast now. Am I not, Mother?" She glanced back at a figure so veiled and still that Satan had taken it for a peak of cloud.

"Yes, child, you are. But I've told you, you have to be deaf, yes, but there are also other things before you're ready."

The child was studying Satan.

"I know who you are," she said. "And who you're going to be. You're Murphy!" She giggled.

It was long since the Lord of Evil had been addressed so lightly. Yet he was sure that this was no supernal innocence that mocked him. Rather, it must be something new in the line of demons. Another Kali? He shivered slightly, his tail, usually so jaunty, thrust out at an awkward, nervous angle. Kali had been relatively nothing compared to this, he felt.

"And I know what you're planning to do with that place." She pointed down. "That's neat. . . . But Mother says I must get over liking neatness, too. I bet you don't know who I am."

"No, I certainly don't," said Lucifer. "But I gather you are — or think you are — one of the people for whom space is being made."

"Not one of the people," she giggled, then was suddenly and coldly mature. "I *am* the people. Tell him, Mother."

"Men used to call her 'Physis,' the veiled woman said. "Now it's 'Nature.' 'Mother Nature.' " She uttered a single-syllable laugh as cold as a gull's cry. "What it will be in the future, we neither know nor care. . . . She made you all, you see. In her dreams. It is when she can create consciously that she will take over."

The girl, abruptly a child again, made a moue. "All I've done so far is sleep and dream and grow," she said. "It's very *boring*."

Her eyes took on a look so pale and fixed that she appeared not only deaf but blind. As she scuffed her foot in discontent, a rift opened in the cloud so near that Satan involuntarily put out an arm to steady her, forgetting the heat of his flesh. Her little breast came against him as she straightened. He was appalled to feel a coldness quenching his very bones — and something else, too.

"You — she has no heartbeat!" he exclaimed to the veiled figure.

"Naturally. She has no heart," the woman replied indifferently. "Only her dreams have hearts."

Satan shook his head, massaging his chilled shoulder. "Evidently things will be very different in the new order to come," he managed to say.

The figure nodded silently. Satan felt he was getting into very deep waters, but he persisted still. This might be his only chance.

"And may one inquire your name, too, ma'am?"

"I haven't a suitable one. Once men called my favor Tyche. Now I am called Chance. I, too, am powerful, but only in my dreams. I dreamt *her*. Perhaps later I will dream again." she stirred. "And now it is time for you to go."

"Of course." Satan bowed his most courtly bow, making his tail curl normally. "I count myself privileged. But may I inquire about one more happening that just could concern you?"

The woman inclined her veiled head.

"In my, ah, humble realms there is a pit so deep that none know what lies within it. Yet recently I seemed to observe a stirring in its depths. Is it possible that one of your new order is arriving in my small province, too?"

"I didn't dream that, Mother, I know," the child exclaimed.

"Arriving, you ask?" said the woman. "Manifesting would be the better word, since if this is what I think, he is everywhere. Yes, it is possible that

this is some incarnation of Entropy, my lord and spouse. He has no need of incarnation, since he is immanent—but your realms would be a fitting place for it, if this be his whim.”

“I see. . . . And, and could you tell me what I am to expect from him, if it be he?”

“Nothing new,” she returned coldly. Satan didn’t like the sound of this.

“It is possible that he will wish to make use of my — my space as well?”

“Oh no, Mother!” the child interrupted. “Why, I’d thought of moving your place to Earth, remember, Mother?”

“And you had best remember to think twice about that plan, if you wish any toys left to play with,” her mother returned.

“But,” said Satan desperately, “won’t Your Majesty have need of some place and services like mine? Some source of final punishment for those who break your laws or commit crimes?”

“Oh, I made all that much too complicated last time,” the child told him seriously. “When I have power, it will all be simple. My laws will be unbreakable. And there will be only one crime, for which everyone must pay.”

“By my tail,” exclaimed Satan, impressed by the small being’s air of command. “Unbreakable laws! That will be certainly a novelty. And only one crime, of which everyone is guilty. What could that be?”

“Bring born.” The child’s icy eyes turned full on him, freezingly. Behind her the tall figure stirred significantly, reminding him that he had been dismissed.

He bowed again, but received no acknowledgement. The girl was murmuring something to her mother, who listened attentively. His very presence had been forgotten.

As he opened his wings and stepped off the cloud edge, he thought he heard the child say, “Oh, I do hope that’s Daddy coming! So I can meet him, at last.”

To which her mother seemed to reply, “You should get on well together, child. You have so much of him in you.” Her tone was the bleakest Satan had ever heard.

To get away from them, he made a great flap that bent the air to his pinions, and went hurtling, almost with his former speed, toward the familiar comfort below. Never had Hell seemed so truly homelike.

Ah, he thought, checking his speed slightly to avoid vaporizing the clouds, it would be good to smell real Hellfire again. And as for whatever might be coming, or thinking of coming, out of that doubly damned pit, well, he’d see how it liked a few loads of lava. Better yet, divert a reliable volcano. And meanwhile he had his Heavenly affairs to see to.

As the first trace of brimstone reached his nostrils, his heart warmed, though his shoulder still ached.

Thinking of which, it occurred to him that he had come through this whole effort in fine shape; that doctor was evidently a capable man. Why not surprise everyone and give him back his hands? He was no lackey of Rome, after all. Let's see — what was a suitable catch? Oh yes — and whirling downward in all his dark splendor, he muttered to himself: "*Hands in the sands of time, Pat and putter and play; Hands that committed crime — Return to him today.*"

There, that would teach those smart-ass goblins to be so sure they knew what the boss was going to do. And if any of them made a mistake of thinking that Heaven had softened him up, they'd soon learn their error.

Whether or not those frigid, Grecophile, oneiromaniacs up there spoke truth, if they had indeed created him and all this cycle, Hell was still his, and his powers were still real.

... While they lasted, a cold echo wailed.



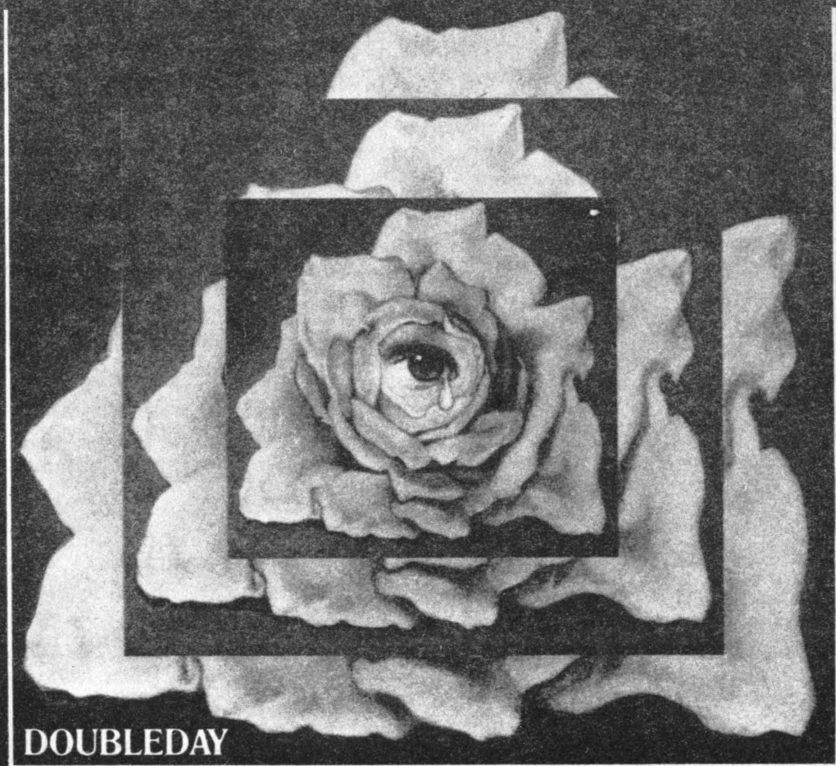
*"How would you like it — being the wee folks' wee folks?"*

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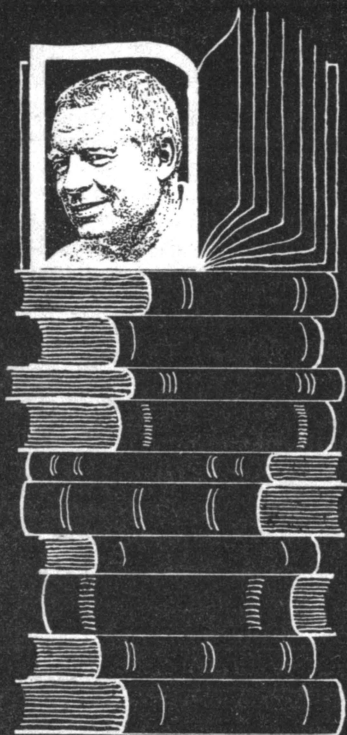
# CUTTING EDGE

DENNIS ETCHISON, EDITOR



DOUBLEDAY

# Books



**ALGIS  
BUDRYS**

*Godbody*, Theodore Sturgeon, Donald I. Fine, Inc. \$14.95

*Santiago*, Mike Resnick, Tor, \$3.50

*Science Fiction and Fantasy Book Review Index, 1980-1984*, H.W. Hall, Ed., Gale Research Company, \$160.00

The late Theodore Sturgeon was a man who got under your skin. He had various ways of doing it. When I was a lad on the farm, for instance, it seemed to me the author of "Microcosmic God" was an inordinately ingenious fellow, and that the author of such stories as "Largo"\* had a astonishing, not to say heart-stopping, insight into the pangs of love. I thought "Killdozer" a compelling piece of suspense writing. And over the years, from time to time there'd be a new Sturgeon story that seemed to play upon a very special string . . . a story which, likely as not, would send me off to stare out windows, or muse upon the nighted stars, to ask myself how—except by some superhuman means—he could know so much about me.

Well, things happened. I got older, and he did not. From time to time, our paths crossed, and although it was always pleasant, it was never free from strain. He kept discovering things that everyone knew all about, and he'd insist on discussing them. I'd meet a plane with him on it, and he'd

*\*It's an obscure story, from a Ziff-Davis pulp, probably Fantastic Adventures. I read it at the right age.*



get off with a whole entourage of instant friends he'd acquired on the flight. Meanwhile, I was a good guy, too, but nobody was forming clubs around me. *And* the son of a bitch could play twelve-string guitar.

He was not, in truth, a man free of faults or aggravating traits. I would not do him the disservice of painting him more guilt than he was. But he was uncommon, as human beings go, and he tried to do humanity various services. Perhaps this arose out of the conviction that it was a duty particularly incumbent on those whom humanity had systematically maltreated during their early days and might not yet be quits with. Sturgeon had it rough as a kid; rough enough to produce psychosis in most people. Like a few such victims, he did not turn criminal, but rather into that unnamed sort which is actively uncriminal. A saint? Oh, no. But in another country\* they used to say of Willie Mays, and Babe Ruth, and a few others, that they belonged in a higher league. As people go, the same was true of Sturgeon, and if he would only show the good grace to go quietly, we could all relax a little.

In the late years of his career, he wrote very little that was published. And in truth if he were still alive, *Godbody* would still be unpublished. It's not finished, although the book contains an ending. You can see the places where it's not finished. He was, as he sometimes did all his life,

and as he invariably did late in it, biting off more than he could chew. What he couldn't bring himself to do was release it anyway, into a world where many of us are heartily sick of writing that rounds off because it isn't about anything that would make roundness difficult to achieve.

*Godbody* is a very short book, in two senses. One, it only has about

*'This is meant poetically. Literally, I mean 'in another context.' but that is not exactly the feeling I meant to convey. I make this explication because people from Mensa read this column. (A few months ago, I did a little jape about Mensa, an organization to which I stopped paying my dues a couple of years ago. Sure enough, I got several letters carefully explaining what Mensa is, literally, and, c/o F&SF, some recruiting literature for this organization of unusually perceptive persons.)*

*Let me, while I'm at it, explain how I got into Mensa. Theodore R. Cogswell, Brig. Gen., U.S. Army Podiatric Corps, (Ret.), as well as Vicar-General of the Order of Saint Asimov the Mute, one day recommended me for membership, I discovered upon opening my mail. Grinning like a fool, anticipating that Cogswell had afoot some scheme parallel to, for instance, his Institute for Twenty-First Century Studies, I wrote the answers on my cuff and took the necessary test. In due course, I received my membership. "O.K., Cogswell," I wrote my old friend, "I'm in. What's the joke going to be and what are my instructions?" "I don't understand this," my old friend wrote back. "I never recommend anyone I think will make it."*

140 pages of story text. Two, you can read it easily in one sitting, which is probably inescapable anyway. It will grab you, hold you, and conduct you through a series of confrontations with thought. You will come out the other side a different person — or, rather, you will have discovered things that were always there in you, probably much to your surprise.

It is interesting to me that Donald I. Fine, Inc., has done so many good things with this book. They didn't set it in extra-large type or design the pages to make it look like more than the good, slim volume it is. By today's standards, too, the price is right. And they have given it an Afterword by Stephen R. Donaldson, which turns out to be a perfectly reasonable, cogent and valuable way in which to add words to the book.

The biggest thing they did right was make Robert Silverberg an acquisitions editor for them. (Search the book thoroughly enough, and you will find that they have given him his own imprint, and that there's obviously some sort of promotional effort afoot in connection with it, but it's a remarkably shy one.) It was Silverberg who brought this book to Fine, and it was he who also obtained a lengthy and excellent Robert A. Heinlein introduction for it.

Now, the thing is that Heinlein is certainly the most prominent SF writer to have written at least one novel treating with the basic impulse to-

ward religion, but he has been joined in that respect by Arthur C. Clarke, Frank Herbert, Damon Knight, and many others from the universe of American-originated newsstand-borne SF. If we begin reaching out toward H.G. Wells, Jack London, Olaf Stapledon and, of course, C.S. Lewis, we begin piling up quite a library. Then there is the quiet Roman Catholicism of Gene Wolfe, whose writing does not so much speak of religion as it does follow a developed morality, and at that point I begin to realize two things: One, that SF must be by its nature profoundly religious in some sense, and, two, that it is not enough to simply discover this large topic. It is necessary to treat with it, and, it being large, to treat with it patiently and bit by bit as opportunity arises. The opportunity we have here is to discuss messianism, and in that respect *Godbody* stands besides Knight's *The Man in The Tree* and Heinlein's *Stranger in A Strange Land*, for just two. (Any more meticulous critic could find scores, I'm sure.)

Messianism deals with humanity's impulse to personify . . . to take its philosophy, or its faith, or its ecstasy, from some singled-out individual, in preference to performing some abstract interaction with a series of intellectual propositions. A messiah is a terrible figure; he — I am unaware of any female messiahs — says that the world is governed by principles you

have been ignoring; he stands before you and works miracles in irrefutable evidence that there is, somewhere, a source of extraordinary beings and powers; he communicates simply and directly to some neglected but extraordinarily powerful hope within you, and he pays no heed to diplomacy. It's no wonder he has to be killed, and it's no wonder SF writers have not been able to leave religion alone; SF is *per se* messianic. Weakly messianic, it would appear, for its "proofs" are, after all, events within "stories" — that is, they are advertised as fictional concoctions.

But SF is clearly messianic enough. It is no longer reasonable to be surprised when the next major writer, in the fullness of a career, tackles this theme; no longer possible to separate SF from the "horror genre," where the whole concern is with power and ethics, their source, nature and abnegation. Finally, it's not at all surprising, really, that an SF writer should have founded a world-wide religion in which millions find workable solutions to mundane problems and assurance of a fruitful afterlife. We want to remember that not only did L. Ron Hubbard found Scientology, he did so only after increasingly impatient pestering from John W. Campbell, Jr. It's not clear that there is in fact a cause-and-effect sequence there, but Campbell's is clearly a name to add to these rosters, if for no other reason than because of his lifelong grapple with

religious conviction under the guise of atheism, a process also undergone in roughly the same way by James Blish, come to think of it, and Blish was Damon Knight's close friend.

Which brings us to *Godbody*, and high time, too:

*Godbody* takes the form of a series of first-person accounts by various people who encounter the mysterious stranger descended one fine day upon their semirural environs. The first of these is Dan Currier, a good-hearted but wishy-washy Protestant minister, who crosses paths with a nude, good-looking man who may or may not be crowned by a circling halo of white moths. His name is Godbody, says the stranger, and touches Currier in order to find out who he is. This action forever energizes Currier into a fresh regard for the world . . . not one imposed from outside, but one that has always waited within him, and which overcomes him so powerfully that it will be days before he even begins to be able to describe some of its details. But it seizes upon him at once, and he acts in pure faith that it is good — it is not only good, it is in any case irresistible — and it reminds me irresistibly of Michael Valentine Smith's declaration that we are God . . . in other words, that we knew it all along; we *are* all kings unwitting, and the Word shall some day set us free.

That is the message, and although a number of persons repeat it, by discovering Godbody's effect upon them, that is the sole and entire message. Oh, it has some details to it, but that's it. It transforms Dan Currier's marriage; it goes on to make a prince of a particularly slimy frog who had been sidling up on Liza Currier's blind side, and finds him a fair damsel, too; it melts the flinty heart of the town banker, and in the end it kills Godbody, who comments "This really is a hell of a way to make a living" and promises he'll be back, which promise he keeps, restoring a blind girl's sight.

Like Godbody himself, with his rustic grammar and his weightless aphorisms about clothes and cathedrals being equally superfluous, *Godbody* is an artfully artless piece of work. The characters are cartoons, but just the right cartoons, for hero and villain both, and their various juxtapositions are very delicately contrived. The final few scenes are hardly finished copy at all — the one is a lecture on early Christianity, the other is this rather embarrassing little Bernadettoid miracle. But one can see, as much as anyone can ever foresee what Sturgeon was ever going to do, how another draft would have made the one smoother and the other more textured. And certainly it would have been a monstrous indelicacy to have someone "complete" this work, as if it were a series of

sausages with the last link not quite shaped out.

No, Sturgeon didn't write in strings, as many writers do. He wrote the whole thing, every time, and wrote the whole thing again until he had it right. But even at the stages in which we find *Godbody* now, it is clear what he intended, and it is clear that the intended effect takes place. Donaldson's Afterword speaks movingly of how this book transcends even the triggers built into a child of missionary parents, and Heinlein's introduction for some not visible but paralogical reason continually juxtaposes his recollections of Sturgeon with his recollections of Hubbard. Technically, all Sturgeon has done is bring a series of witnesses to the front of the room and had them testify to miracles . . . oh, and he has done it in such a way that we fail to note they are fictional witnesses, and in any case we fail to note they couldn't possibly be speaking to us.

Mike Resnick brings us a sort of vest-pocket messiah, and aptly so, because *Santiago* and its epomymous lead character are straight out of the generic pulp tradition. To give you the storyline quickly, Santiago is the biggest, baddest bounty hunter/pirate in the whole civilized galaxy, which galaxy is indistinguishable from frontier America in the cattle-town days. Santiago is a figure of legend in song and story, and one by one the various

gunners of lesser stripe must go up against him, for thereby hangs the gaining of the untimate rep, plus the acquisition of the immense price which weighs upon his head.

The details of how this works out are spread across a great many small-type pages by a man who is firmly and assertively one of our major heirs to pulp writing traditions. You may take it from me that he will not disappoint you if that is what you seek from him and this epic of the spaceways, in which faster-than-light starships substitute for the Butterfield Stage and Miss Kitty's motives are not entirely unblemished. I kept looking for Bat Durston by name, and did not find him, but that is a very slight oversight with which to tax the sapient Mr. Resnick.

When you look at pulp writing, you eventually come to realize that it's all about ethics. (So is all of fiction, but pulp lays it right out there on the line.) The pulp story works on its readers because every action in it is a test of whether the actor deserves what will happen to him in eventual consequence. Pulp tales state cause-and-effect plainly, and they make it indistinguishable from worthiness-and-just-desserts. What this means is that if you really like pulp, you've built up quite an involvement with ethics, and with the great question of what it is that determines worth and judges it, and whether a consciousness of worth springs from

"instinct" — that is, from something instilled by processes other than those of Mendelian heredity or Pavlovian conditioning.

The tale of the master gunfighter — occasionally transformed into such personified forces as Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, and in any case dealing out justice beyond appeal — has gripped us for generations. I am not the first to find overtones of messianism in it, and so need not enlarge upon that fact, especially since Sergio Leone made an ikon of Clint Eastwood while explaining it graphically, and almost succeeded in evoking it again in *Once Upon a Time in America*.

What I wanted to bring up here is that a good technical way of analyzing a pulp story is to look at its ethics. I think you'll find that it succeeds or fails — that is, delivers emotional satisfaction — to the extent that it justifies that thing we call the Judeo-Christian ethic and find most powerful when explicated by evangelists.

Interesting, eh? What I suggest you do is read *Santiago* . . . go ahead, you'll enjoy it to at least the extent of \$3.50. And then I suggest you think about the religious implications of the ending. If you've already read it — which I imagine many of you have — I suggest you read it again, in the light of all of the above.

What is SF, that we are mindful of it? Well, I have only the vaguest and

most tendentious theories, although I do know that mine are right. But in any event there are people taking it seriously out there, and in token of that, the indefatigable Gale Research Company has published a weighty *Science Fiction and Fantasy Book Review Index, 1980-1984*. It lists innumerable SF books, fiction and non-fiction, and tells you where you can find reviews of them. It also lists innumerable SF authors, and tells you where you can find reviews of them. Then it lists nearly innumerable essays on various aspects of SF, first by author and then by subject. It has, in other words, got a lock on the forensics of those four years in SF. And it is part of a series including annual volumes. Sure, it's steep at \$160. Doing the work wasn't easy for editor H.W. Hall, or for his associate, Geraldine L. Hutchins, who did the SF research index. More to the point, getting it all (nearly) straight was a lot of work for Gale Research, and then there's the fact that not too many people are going to buy this volume. But those who do need it need it a lot, and will be getting a lot back.

I cannot imagine a more informative single work of reference for SF scholar and serious aficionado. This is a key into a vast domain, and you can put that on the cover of the next one.

I was touched when, two weeks before this writing, I learned some-

thing of mine had won the *Locus* Magazine poll for the best non-fiction book of 1985. The book was, to give it its formal title, *Benchmarks: Galaxy Bookshelf* by Algis Budrys, and it reprinted all my review columns for the "Galaxy Bookshelf" feature in *Galaxy* Magazine.

Well, I was going to write a letter of thanks for publication in *Locus*, but was told that would seem tacky and self-serving. O.K., I would like here to thank all those *Locus* readers who are also *F&SF* readers and who voted in the poll. And I would like to tell all of you that even before this signal event, Southern Illinois University Press had been sufficiently pleased with the performance of that first book so that they offered me a contract on another one.

This next one will begin reprinting my *F&SF* columns, and it will be out some time in late 1987, I imagine. It will be called by some variation of *Benchmarks*, and it will be the usual labor of love, with my wife doing the Xeroxes, me doing the cutting, pasting, copy-editing and indexing, and some pair of my friends dragged in to do the introductory material, as Frederik Pohl and Catherine McClenahan were last time. I am hoping that one of them this time is Edward Ferman — Ed, this is your formal invitation — and in any event I want to thank all of you, whatever else you read, for having made this book necessary.

*Reg Bretnor's new story introduces a team of parapsychologists led by Chief Sam — Colonel Samuel Warhorse — on the trail of the cause behind a series of Fortean events: everything from flying elephants to disappearing buses . . .*

# Ultimate Weapon

BY

REGINALD BRETNOR

**I**n Moscow, Ilya Ivanovitch Kulagin stood outside the KGB's Butyrka Prison, where his wife, mother of his four children, was being held prior to being transported to an unnamed destination to serve her twenty-year sentence for the illegal possession of American currency. They had thrown him out when he asked to say goodbye to her, and even as the iron gates closed behind him he knew that probably he would never see her again. Rage boiled within him as he walked away. Half a block down the street, tears coursing down his cheeks, he turned and shook a futile fist at the dark prison and the comfortable apartment house, occupied by over-indulged KGB personnel, that masked it. Abruptly he lost all control. Pointing at the apartments, stabbing the air with an accusing finger, he shouted, "Curse you! Curse all of

you! Whelps of the devil! Burn! Burn! *Burn!* May God smite you! Burn! Fall in ruins! Let everything in you be destroyed! *NOW!*" he screamed.

There was a strange moment of total silence. Then, with no warning, first five, then ten, then scores of windows in the building burst outward; flames spurted from them; smoke poured out of them. Screams reached his ears, cries of agony. The building now was a mass of flames, and it was shaking. Even as he stood there watching it, the building started to come apart. First its sides gave way; then he heard crashes from its center. In minutes, almost before the first sounds of the approaching fire brigade reached his ears, the apartment house had been reduced to a heap of fiercely flaming rubble.

Ilya Ivanovitch watched it dumbfounded. He looked at the pointing

finger, which, he knew, had brought it down. "God!" he told himself. "They say there is no God, but God has given me power over them." He thought of striking at the Kremlin, decided not to because it was a part of ancient Russia. Slowly he made his way to a subway station and took the train to his own district. It was hard to think, hard to know what to do. Such a tremendous responsibility! He needed a drink or two to clear his brain. He went to a favorite tavern and found one or two acquaintances already there. He had one drink, two. After the fifth, he decided he must share his secret with others who, like himself, were the oppressed. He boasted to them of what he had done to the apartment house, and found that somehow word of the burning had already reached them. They laughed at him. He repeated everything in dramatic detail.

It took the KGB less than three minutes to get there. "Bastards!" he screeched at them. "Turds! Burn like your families! *Die! Burn!*"

His finger stabbed the air — and nothing happened. Very shortly afterward he was in an interrogation cell at the infamous Lefortovo Prison, and we need not concern ourselves with what happened to him there.

In Calcutta, Indir Ghosh, a popular holy man, was sitting serenely on the sidewalk of a main street, watching a religious procession led by sev-

eral highly decorated elephants. He closed his eyes meditatively, contemplating the massive dignity of the animals. "What a wonderful thing it would be," he murmured, "if they could fly." And in his mind's eye, he saw them rise into the air, their mahouts and their passengers suddenly the members of an undreamed-of pantheon.

Screams and shouts shattered his reverie — the screams of women and children, the screech of brakes. His eyes opened. There were no elephants to be seen. Automatically he looked up. They had risen perhaps two hundred feet. They stayed there for a full minute, squealing in terror. Then they fell, and as elephants are not equipped with landing gear, the carnage was appalling. Police and soldiers finally came and destroyed those beasts who had not been killed outright, bearing away the dead and injured and spending some hours tidying up the street. One of the largest elephants had fallen directly on Indir himself, and only one small boy had heard his murmur and remembered it.

In Tokyo a bank officer named Heihachiro Nakayama was lying happily in bed with a lovely geisha whose patron he had recently become. He was looking admiringly at her classic profile in the soft light filtering through the shoji, and was thinking idly what a pleasant life he would



have if some obliging demon, say a fox or badger, would rid him of his shrewish wife and her — not his— two always troublesome children. He giggled as he imagined fanged *bakemono* foxes chasing Hideko and the brats around the house and finally catching them. However, his mind was soon diverted as his hand crept up the geisha's silken thigh, and after they had made love twice again, he promptly went to sleep. He thought no more about it until the following afternoon, when he came home and found what had happened to his family. First he went to a nearby Buddhist monastery and confessed everything to the prior, a very sensible man who advised him to seek out a good psychiatrist. After that he wandered through the streets for hours before returning home, wrote a rambling and scarcely decipherable account of what he, in his wickedness, had done, and finally threw himself in front of a hundred-and-fifty mile-an-hour train. The account found its way into a highly sensational tabloid, and was eventually translated into English, but hardly anybody paid any attention to it.

In northern Arizona a bus carrying forty-seven men, women, and children left the small town of Ashfork bound for Prescott, an hour and a half's run south. It passed through a wide spot in the road named Chino Valley, twenty miles from its destina-

tion, right on schedule. Then, in full view of more than a score of ordinary, sober citizens, it suddenly was no longer there. It wasn't anywhere; and where it had been, there was only a slowly dissipating cloud of bone-gray dust. There were no clues. The police learned that among the observers, there was a girl whom the bus driver, one Alec Moreno, had made pregnant, and whom he had refused to marry, but there had been no way to link that to the disappearance.

Those were the first four cases I glanced at, and the list Chief Sam— Colonel Samuel Warhorse — had given me ran into thirty or forty or more pages. I skimmed over it. Charles Fort would have been delighted. A grand piano had suddenly appeared in a municipal swimming pool, where only swimmers had been a moment previously. A very fat old lady, naked in her tub, had found herself splashing, not in water, but in small, wet, live fish. A military pilot, a major with fifteen years of service, flying at twelve thousand feet, had seen his craft dissolve around him; luckily his parachute had remained intact, so he had lived to tell of it — and to spend days trying to answer the questions they kept throwing at him. There had been appearances and disappearances. Things had blown up for no reason; other things, similarly, had suddenly imploded. Four hijackers, armed to the teeth and having a fine

time terrorizing a jet's passengers and crew, had — with no one even realizing what had happened — fallen messily to the floor with their throats slit from ear to ear.

I'd first met Chief Sam during the Vietnam War, where he was an army shrink doing his thing at a Saigon hospital. I was a fly-boy, a chopper pilot. My problem had been simple. I always knew ahead of time when anybody in my outfit was going to get cancelled out — *always*. It was especially bad because I couldn't do anything about it. How do you go to a fine young warrant officer and tell him to refuse duty or goldbrick out because Charlie was going to get him? I'd come down for a routine physical, and before I knew it, Colonel Sam and I had had several talks, and he'd convinced me to accept it. Eventually he recruited me for The Team, which may or may not be part of the armed forces, just as he himself may or may not now be a colonel. It consists entirely of people like me, people who have an unusual but useful talent — my lovely half-Japanese wife, for instance, who is so delicately tuned an empath that simply driving by a prison or a slaughterhouse, or even a hospital, is an ordeal for her. And The Team has kept going. It's based, more or less, in Colorado, because that's where Chief Sam lives, so most of us are in or around a mining town called Cinnabar, just big enough to hold the federal agencies

that give us our cover jobs, and where we're close when he needs us. Hush-hush? Yes — so much so that quite a few of us don't even know The Team exists. Even I might not if it weren't for the fact that I am, again more or less, its second-in-command.

He's a remarkable man, Chief Sam. He's tall and broad, with black eyebrows like Sequoya's and thick gray hair. He's a psychiatrist and a parapsychologist and a lover of opera and chamber music. He is also a medicine chief of his own Osage Nation, and regularly goes back to Oklahoma to take part in tribal doings. His mind has made room for both cultures, just as it has for any number of languages.

He phoned me that morning. "Can you come on over, Garry?" he asked. "We're onto something really interesting."

I drove over immediately, to the familiar office in his mountain home, and he seated me by his huge desk. "Here it is." He handed me the list, and said nothing more till I'd looked it over. Then: "Well, what do you make of it?" he asked.

"It's the sort of stuff Charles Fort's books were full of, isn't it? Impossible things that happen, then get cleverly explained away, then forgotten. The only thing really unusual, it seems to me, is that in the whole list only two dates get mentioned. Do you really mean all this happened just on those two days?"

He shook his head. "Not two days,

Garry. Two *dates*, but not two *days*. Some are from one side of the international dateline, some from the other, and those from the day side outnumber the night ones. But that's not all. Every event listed — and as you've probably noticed, they're all witnessed and attested to — every one of them took place at *exactly* the same time, roughly two minutes starting at, say 1:51 P.M. here, 2:51 P.M. there, 10:51 P.M. someplace else, and 3:51 A.M. somewhere on the other side of the date line. While those elephants were taking their little flight over Calcutta, Gospodin Kulagin was burning down the Butyrka Prison apartment house and that bus was vanishing in Arizona — and all the rest as well. What does that say to you?"

"We-e-ell —" I hesitated, frowning. "It says that all of a sudden a hell of a lot of people with dormant talents — and awfully strong ones — were able to exercise them without knowing it — *simultaneously*."

"And?"

"And that means that — that something, somehow, *enabled* them to do it."

"Garry, I know it's hard to swallow — I've swallowed it. Those talents — even the limited ones The Team has — are rare. When they aren't nonexistent, they're usually rigidly suppressed. Therefore, isn't there one more corollary?"

"Colonel Sam," I said, "There is,

but it's even tougher to accept: that the suppression isn't accidental, that for all man's history something has deliberately acted to hold the power of our minds in check."

"Except for occasional apparent lapses?"

"Except for those — and maybe it doesn't always work on minds that are a bit defective; so that half-retarded teenagers can come up with poltergeists, and lunatics with veridical prophecies."

"Yes, and very great and holy personages with miracles like — oh, let's say loaves and fishes, or the raising of the dead."

"It's all too logical for comfort," I told him.

"Yes," he answered, "and there's one more little point I haven't mentioned, which you may have noticed. Every episode on that list occurred in the Northern Hemisphere. There have been *no* reports from south of the equator. Therefore, I think we safely can assume that there are *two* such centers of influence working on our minds, and that each has one hemisphere as its area."

"But what *are* they?"

"Beings? Devices? Minds? Who knows? But whatever they are, since we've deduced that they exist, very possibly others may, too; and in the world as we know it, considering the power they restrict, it behooves us to get there first. There are plenty of people in the world who'd see this as

the ultimate weapon — all they'd have to do is get ahold of it, learn what makes it work, and have it doing tricks for them. I wouldn't want it to get into the hands of anyone like the late Ayatollah, or the boys in the Kremlin."

I shuddered. "Strikes me that monkeying with anything like that could be downright dangerous. It looks like the human race, or anyhow a lot of us, are a time bomb just waiting to go off. Wouldn't anybody figure that?"

"No, I don't think so, Garry. Sane people would, but those who are dead certain they have God working for them, or the Laws of History—well, at least some would be sure they were smart enough to manage it."

"And so?" I said.

"So we go after it ourselves, you and me and maybe one or two others. As far as anybody else is concerned—and, with one exception, I mean *anybody*, we'll be a hush-hush scientific expedition, complete with impressive instruments and everything, looking for something mysterious in the ice."

"You mean we're going up near the North Pole?"

"*Somewhere*," said Chief Sam. "The North Pole, or the North Magnetic Pole, or wherever. We don't know the laws that govern it, so it may be pretty much anywhere — anywhere it can cover the Northern Hemisphere. It could be in orbit, though if

that were the case, chances are it'd have been spotted by this time, or underground, or below the surface of the sea. Luckily we've got a girl who probably can tell us."

"Somebody on The Team?"

He nodded. "Just recently. I found her in Virginia. Her name's Veronica Langmuir."

I laughed. "She sounds straight out of a Gothic."

Chief Sam didn't laugh. "She is, Garry, she is. Wait till you meet her. But she's the finest dowser I've ever run across, and that includes some of the guys who were finding land mines for the marines back in 'Nam. Usually all you have to do is tell her what you want to find, and she'll pretty much pinpoint it. All she needs is a good map. We'll go visit her as soon as we're through with Mother Burton."

"Mother Burton? Why?"

Mother Burton was a weird old Gypsy. She and her daughter, who was just as weird, lived in an ancient mobile home along the highway about thirty miles north of Cinnabar, and they told fortunes every which way. Chief Sam thought a lot of her, but I'd never been able to figure out whether her talent was for real — maybe because she was such a terrible bore. She never got tired of bragging how she was an English Gypsy, and how she'd cast the runes for everybody from Churchill to Maggie Thatcher, to say nothing of almost the whole House of Lords, and how an ancestor

of hers had told Isobel Arundel she was destined to marry a man with the same name as her tribe's, who turned out to be Sir Richard Burton.

"Why?" Chief Sam chuckled. "Because you're going to have your fortune told. Remember? You've always known if someone with you is going to get hurt or killed, but you've never foreseen anything about yourself—not even that time you skidded on the ice and broke your arm. And on this expedition I'd just as soon the old lady gave you a clean bill. After all, you've going to help fly the chopper."

Somehow, though I realized we'd be heading up into the Arctic, I hadn't anticipated getting quite so intimate with it.

"Colonel," I said, "I'm shivering already. A chopper doesn't put much between you and the great outdoors."

"Don't worry," he said sweetly. "We'll keep you as warm as toast."

I hadn't seen Mother Burton for a year or more, but she hadn't changed a bit. She had the same wrinkles; same bright, beady eyes; and all the stage-gypsy trappings: gaudy skirts and scarves and — God help me! — a chain of Krugerrands that would have made me worry for her if I hadn't known that when she told a stranger's fortune, her daughter would be behind the door into the kitchen right next to their loaded riot gun. Besides, if you're worth your salt as a

fortune-teller, you ought to be able to feel when someone is fixing to rip you off.

Anyhow, both she and her daughter gave me the works: palms, tea leaves, crystal ball, Mother Burton gossiping all the time daughter was working and daughter doing her best to shush her.

"I see you going on a journey, a long journey, you brave young man!" she finally told me. "So does my daughter — what's that, Maysie? Didn't I say a long, *cold* journey? You're going with Mr. Sam here himself, and — yes, I see another man, a great big man in uniform — or maybe he ain't wearing it? — and you got two-three ladies with you, only one of 'em has something wrong with her. Lord God, it's cold where you're going! And it's real funny — why do I keep thinking about Santa Claus?"

"Tell me, Ma," Chief Sam said, "will Garry be coming back all in one piece?"

She nodded, pecking with her head like a determined bird. "There's something I can't understand up where you're going, something pretty scary, and I get the notion of things happening to people, nasty things, but not to you — nor to the ladies you're with. Seems like maybe it was far off, but I ain't sure."

"Do you see any other people up there except us?"

She frowned. "Puzzles me," she said. "I do and yet I don't. I get the

smell, sort of, of foreigners. Could there be foreigners up there, maybe after something?"

"There could indeed," Chief Sam told her.

After that, she couldn't seem to come up with much more information, neither she nor daughter, so we thanked her and drove home again.

"Well, that makes me feel better," Sam assured me.

"Me too," I answered, "but I don't know that it'll make me feel any warmer. And now what do we do, take off to see your girlfriend in Virginia?"

"She's not in Virginia, not any longer. I've brought her out to Ruysdale. She's staying with Amy Hampton, at least for the time being."

I'd worked with Amy several times. She had two talents: one for diagnosis — not just physical ailments, but also true states of mind, no matter how dissembled; the other, not really powerful, for PK. She was cheerful, buxom, middle-aged, thoroughly dependable.

"On the way, I'd like to swing by Cinnabar," Chief Sam went on, "and pick your wife up. I've a hunch we'll need her, and I'd like to see how she reacts to Veronica. O.K.?"

Marina's very fond of him and trusts him implicitly, so I just nodded.

On the way, he filled me in on how he had it figured out. "Chances are," he said, "that we won't have to

worry about anybody but the Russians. That's not dead certain, but they've been spending all sorts of rubles on psi research for years now — more than we ever have. So if they've tumbled to the situation, they'll have people who can maybe do something about it. Besides that, geographically they can get as close to the action as we can. However, they'll have one big disadvantage. Everything out of their research has to fit into Old Man Marx's nineteenth-century picture of how and why — doctrinaire materialism — and there are a great many phenomena that not only don't fit but positively contradict it. Furthermore, I can't imagine them mounting an expedition as important as this without having some KGB types along, and that's not going to help their sensitivities *at all*."

"What'll we do if we run into them?"

"I don't rightly know, Garry." He frowned. "Mother Burton was pretty sure we're going to survive, and when she's serious she's usually around 95 percent right. As for self-defense measures and stuff like that, let's hope they won't be necessary. Anyhow, we can't do any detailed planning till we know more about whatever it is we're looking for, and even then we'll probably have to play the whole thing by ear."

Somehow, just listening to his deep voice discussing it reassured me — after all, he'd never muffed any of the

missions we'd carried out together. The rest of the way, he talked about such practical considerations as what we might expect from recon satellites — ours and theirs. And we both speculated on who or what might have installed the Monitor — we'd already given it the name — and how far in the past they'd done it. He summed it up succinctly. "There are three possibilities," he said. "First, aliens from outer space, buzzing around in flying saucers or whatever maybe a million years ago, wise enough to recognize our potentials for development and destruction, and nice enough not to wipe us out; next, some sort of Secret Ascended Masters who're still around — though that seems the least probable; and finally some really ancient race."

"I can't think of any with that kind of know-how," I objected.

"Not on our historical scale, perhaps, but how about earlier — *much* earlier? A race with no surviving ruins? People who disappeared without a trace? Think how many tribes and nations have their legends of the Old Ones. And remember what the Lord said in Genesis: *Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the Earth*. That *replenish* is an interesting word, Gary. Maybe it wasn't accidental. Who knows how many cataclysms — shifting poles, suddenly surging oceans — may have wiped the world clean of advanced life? Anyhow, we don't know who put it there, and maybe we never

will. But it *is* there, and we know what it's doing there, and for the moment that's all-important."

I phoned Marina along the way, and when we reached Cinnabar she was ready and waiting for us. Her Aunt Tomiko had been living with us since the first of our two kids was born, so there was no problem there. She got into the front seat between Sam and me, beautiful and fragile and bright and golden and tough as a bowstring despite her sensitivity. She kissed Sam's ear, patted me on the knee, and said, "What's in the wind? Can you let me in on it?"

Sam told her, and she listened without interrupting, but when he'd finished she frowned a little and said, "Wouldn't something like that, something as important as that, created by someone probably far, far more advanced than we — well, wouldn't it have some built-in defenses of its own? Probably pretty effective ones?"

I hadn't even thought of that possibility, and Chief Sam hadn't mentioned it. Keeping his eyes on the road, he nodded gravely. "Chances are it has. That's certainly something we'll have to keep in mind. But if it does have, maybe it also has some way of separating the sheep from the goats — those who are a danger to it from those who aren't."

"Do you think this woman we're going to see can tell us?"

"Marina dear, perhaps she can.

She's a dowser, meaning she can locate things, sometimes using a pendulum, sometimes not. As I told Gary, all she needs is a good map. But she not only can find things — sometimes she can even tell what those things are, and that's what I'm hoping for in this case. But I'm not going to tell you any more about her. I want you to meet her with no preconceptions, so don't judge her by her Romantic Revival name. I want to know exactly how you feel about her."

"She's new to us, isn't she?"

"Very new. It's been less than three weeks since I persuaded her to move out here and work with us."

Ruysdale is about twenty-five miles from Cinnabar, in the opposite direction from Mother Burton's, and it didn't take us long to get there— Chief Sam isn't a slow driver. Amy Hampton's little house was only a few blocks from where we entered the town, and Amy, tipped off by Sam, had taken time off from her library job and was waiting for us at the door.

She waited while Sam brought a map case out of the back seat, then hugged us all and, talking a blue streak, chivied us into the living room. "Now just you-all sit down," she said. "I've got coffee and snacks all fixed — just have to bring them in. That over there —" She pointed to a tall, straight-back chair by the fireplace, upholstered in a muted, glowing green. "— that's Veronica's. You can sit anywhere else you please. My

lady'll be out in just a minute."

"*My Lady?*" I thought, and exchanged glances with Marina. And yet there had been no sarcasm behind the words, only affection.

"Veronica!" she called. "Veronica, company's here!"

There was no reply, but a few seconds later we heard steps in the little corridor leading to the bedrooms. Then, very suddenly, Veronica Langmuir was there, and I saw what Chief Sam had meant by saying that she really was straight out of a Gothic. She was very tall, nearly six feet, but she did not stoop like so many tall women do, and she was beautiful with a snow-blond Northern beauty seldom seen except in dreams or dreamlike illustrations. She stood there, and her face surveyed the room — not her eyes. I realized with a shock; her *face*. Her eyes were light, a very light greenish blue, and I saw instantly that she was blind, totally blind. She was wearing a housecoat — I suppose it was — with a high collar and puffed sleeves, and all as warmly yellow as a newly opened daffodil. Around her neck she wore a string of cairngorms.

"Colonel Warhorse," she said, and her voice was as beautiful as she herself, "Amy told me you were on your way. I am so glad to see you, and your friends — my colleagues now? Let's see, Douglas Garrioch is one of them, I know, and there's someone charming with him. I can sense her."



"That's Marina. That's my wife," I blurted.

"Marina is a lovely name," she said. "And now I'd like to see you the only way I can, with my fingertips. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not!" cried Marina, stepping up to her. "Come, Garry."

Her long cool fingers touched our cheeks. "Nice, *nice*!" she murmured. "Oh, I'm so happy that you came."

I realized that she had developed many talents, many senses, to make up for her lack of vision.

She moved unerringly to the high-backed chair and seated herself as if were a throne. "We can start whenever you want to," she said. "We can use the card table."

Amy brought it out and set it on its legs. Chief Sam opened his map case, removed its contents, and spread the topmost chart on the table. It showed the very top of the world.

Veronica touched it very lightly with her left hand. "Everything feels white," she said. "Almost everything. No, it's not like other maps." From her housecoat's pocket she had taken a pointed crystal pendulum on a silver chain, and now her hovering right hand began to move slowly across the surface of the chart, holding the crystal an inch or so above its surface. "Colonel Warhorse," she asked, "can you tell me what I'm supposed to be searching for?"

"I can't exactly," he replied. "All I can tell you is what we think it *does*.

It is something fashioned, probably long, long ago, by beings about whom we know nothing, and it has power — power to suppress those rare talents our own Team employs in a small way. Is that enough? Later I'll tell you more."

"It is enough, I think."

She leaned forward, her expression suddenly intense. "Yes-s-s," she whispered. "Yes."

The pendulum quivered. Abruptly it moved across the surface of the chart, the surface of the frozen polar sea, and her hand followed it. It passed true north, swerved round, began a slow movement toward Bathurst Island and the magnetic pole, then reversed itself and, much more rapidly, crossed almost to the north Alaskan coast near Point Barrow, then back toward true north again — a hundred miles, two hundred, and a hundred more. Halfway, and almost equidistant from Alaska and the Siberian coast, it hesitated, stopped dead, still quivering. Slowly, very slowly, it began describing a figure eight — or was it the symbol of infinity?

Veronica put her elbows on the chart and steepled her fingers trying to steady it. "How very strange!" she exclaimed. "It's *never* been like this before. It just won't come any closer. Do you have a larger-scale map?"

"Yes, I do," Chief Sam told her. "But couldn't we do better with satellite or aerial photos?"

She shook her head. "I can't work with them. They just don't tell me anything. I don't know why."

He changed charts, making sure the coordinates were aligned — and the pendulum simply continued its strange, sweeping figure-eight movement, on a greater scale, more violently.

"That — that's a little better," she said. "I — I can feel it, whatever's there." For a long moment she was silent, brow furrowing. "I can feel it, but I don't understand it. It — it's as though it were *alive* somehow — and yet not truly. But it's not a machine, no. And I can sense the power in it. But — but there's something wrong. If I were sure it was alive, I'd say it was — well, somehow distressed, terribly, terribly distressed. But I don't think it's alive, not really, the way we are. At least, its body isn't." She laughed, a bit hysterically. "Oh dear! What does *that* mean?"

"It could mean," Chief Sam said gently, "that its body never was alive, but that its spirit lives — which would pose a nice quandary for our Russian counterparts."

From the map case, he had taken a flat portfolio of photographs, selecting one; and peering over his shoulder, I saw that it was white, white, white — but it showed no smooth sea of snow, not this. For ages the pack ice had been pushed and crushed. It was scarped, hummocked, pressure-ridged. The coor-

dinates told me that it showed the area over which the pendulum still did its erratic dance, but there was nothing to distinguish it from its surroundings.

"Can you calm it down a little, Veronica? Can we pinpoint it more closely?"

"I — I simply *can't*," she answered. "Maybe if I were right there on the ground — I mean the ice — I could with a divining rod, but on the map I can't."

"Well, it doesn't matter," Chief Sam said. "We have it within something like a twenty- to thirty-mile circle, and that ought to be close enough, at least till we get there tomorrow."

"*Tomorrow?*" I gasped.

"Of course tomorrow. Garry, this won't wait. If it were at all possible, I'd say today." His face was very grave. "The only question is, who besides you is coming with me? It won't be anything like polar exploration in the old days. We'll have no trouble keeping warm, no trouble with supplies, no real risk of being out of touch — unless we're hit by a really rough unexpected storm, and there's nothing like that threatening. But of course there'll be danger. We'll make our approach from Point Barrow, and the Russians — if any do show up — will be coming from way up in Siberia, about the same distance away." He paused. "It'll all be voluntary," he said, "but I'd like to have both Marina

and Veronica along: Veronica to find the Monitor for us, and Marina because she is an empath and because, if the Monitor is indeed alive, any rapport we can establish with it will be invaluable."

He looked at all of us, and Veronica said instantly, "Colonel Warhorse, of course I'll come. But — but won't I be a — a problem for you? After all—"

"I'll come, too, if you want me to," Amy offered. "I'll be Seeing-Eye Amy for you, Veronica. Tell our big Injun here how good I'm getting at it."

"She really is, Colonel."

Chief Sam chuckled. "And Marina?"

"I certainly don't intend to let Garry go wandering off into the Frozen North without me. I'll tell Aunt Tomiko to take care of the kids—she'll be tickled pink. Will there be any others with us?"

"A navy type, Tom Conradin, an old friend of mine. He's being flown out, and he'll meet us up at Barrow. After I make some calls, I'll drive you and Garry back to Cinnabar to kiss your kids. Then we'll have dinner together, and we'll be picked up later in the evening."

"B-but won't we have to, well, *pack?*" Veronica asked.

"Not at all. Everything'll be taken care of. Amy, may I use your phone?"

Sam was on the phone for about

half an hour, talking into a little scrambler he attached to it after making his connections. He gave precise directions: the type of aircraft he'd need, the emergency equipment, everything — even the arctic clothing and, I was relieved to hear, personal weaponry. From the way it sounded, nobody on the other end was arguing with him. So it goes when one's authority starts all the way at the top.

When he hung up, his expression was really grim. "The Russkies are already there," he said.

"So what do we do now?" I asked.

"We go anyhow. It's all arranged, and we've as much right there as they have." He put the scrambler back in his pocket. "Veronica, we'll be back in an hour at the outside. Bye now."

Back in the car, he seemed to forget all about the Soviets. "What do you think of Veronica?" he asked Marina. "What's she like deep down?"

"Sam, she's as beautiful inside as she is outside. She's kind, and there's no bitterness about her blindness, and she's strong, very strong. But I could feel a deep, deep, dreadful sadness, her fear of being dependent, of causing people trouble. I think it'd be awfully difficult for her to form any really close relationship, like marriage or even an affair — perhaps especially an affair. She has a horror of being pitied."

I thought of what a strange sort of expedition it was going to be, and of how odd the people at Point Barrow

were sure to think it — blind Gothic heroine complete with handmaiden, lovely Eurasian woman complete with one time fly-boy husband, Indian chief with his eagles on his shoulders instead of their feathers in a warbonnet. And I wondered, too, how the thing we were seeking would react to us — and what we'd do if and when the Russkies or whoever came.

"Chief Sam," I said, "we know what took place during that two-minute interval when our hickus was off the air. I'm sure your analysis is right on line. But has anyone really looked into the history of such Fortean happenings — I mean, to see if there may have been similar time-coincidences long ago? What else occurred when the Red Sea opened for the children of Israel, or when the sun stood still for Joshua? Whatever the hickus itself is, its malfunctions could go back a long way."

"We thought of that, but there's been no time. Anyhow, our cursory survey of the literature showed only a handful of coincidences that could have been at all significant — nothing like our several hundred cases a week ago. So again, we don't know how, what, or why. But we do know we have to act without losing any more time. Remember what I said about the Ultimate Weapon."

I thought of what might happen if someone found it, fiddled with it, and ruined it completely. "My God!" I said. "If it got turned completely off,

the results could be mind-boggling."

"Exactly, Garry. But aside from getting there first, if possible, there's nothing we can do about it. Right now I want you to tell me if your good Scottish second sight is getting any warnings about Veronica and Amy and Marina — and about me, for that matter."

I shook my head. "Nothing, Colonel," I answered. "I don't feel anything about any of you, except —" I paused, trying to put a vague hunch into words. "— except I think something's going to happen to Veronica, something stupendous, good or bad — I can't tell which."

"Let's pray it's good," he said. He didn't need to warn any of us not to depend on what I could foresee. One of The Team's ironclad rules was always to take all ordinary precautions. Just because your third eye showed you it'd be safe to run that red light at over eighty didn't mean you went ahead and did it.

A navy aircraft picked us up at Cinnabar's Air National Guard field at 7:30 on the dot, and another, better suited to the climate, ferried us on out to Point Barrow from our Alaskan landing. By 1:00 a.m. we were being shown to our quarters for the night, and Sam had introduced us to his naval friend. Tom Conradin was a commander: tall; handsome in a kindly, weather-beaten sort of way; and— well, the only word is *substantial*.

"Tom can fly anything, Garry," Sam said. He grinned. "And you're going to find him very talented in other ways. We've worked together several times now."

Then he introduced Tom to Veronica, and I have never in my life witnessed an introduction like it. It was as though there was an instant flow of — what? energy? life force? pure harmony? — between the two of them. I felt that it was something beyond my understanding, and I resented it because I could not understand. How was it, I asked myself, that whenever Sam set up one of his people-equations, it never failed to work out?

Saying nothing, smiling, Veronica touched Tom Conradin's features, slowly, as though savoring each detail. She murmured her pleasure. Then, gently, very gently, he took her right hand in his and kissed its palm.

"I'm glad, Veronica," he said. "I am glad."

"And I," she echoed.

"I've a feeling," Amy whispered in my ear, "that I'm not going to be Seeing-Eye Amy too much longer. I—I'm so happy I could c-cry."

Sam just stood there beaming.

*Talented?* I thought. *You said it!* *He and she — they certainly have something I don't have.*

The other introductions followed; somebody took orders for a nightcap; we relaxed for ten or fifteen minutes, then went to bed.

Next morning, everything was as ready as Sam had promised: every bit of arctic clothing, wonderfully insulated, electrically heated. I knew it would fit each of us perfectly — and that in spite of being used to Sam's effectiveness, I'd still wonder how the devil he'd managed it.

We had breakfast in the officer's mess, and there the base commandant joined us. Over the ham and eggs and hotcakes, he briefed us about the Soviets. They'd come in three choppers, and there must've been more than twenty personnel. They lighted down a couple of miles from the area Veronica's pendulum had indicated, and at first they seemed to be searching it methodically, but before long their movements began to look more and more erratic; they started going around, not in circles, but in ellipses, pretty much as the pendulum had done over the chart. Our people had kept them under routine observation, making a photographic record using telephoto lenses, which they now showed us, together with an outline of the area covered.

Chief Sam watched it silently. Some of them made a great show of using scientific instruments as though prospecting — exactly as we'd proposed to do. But they kept breaking off more and more often, stopping to discuss or, judging from the vigor of their gestures, possibly to argue.

"What the hell do you suppose

they were looking for?" asked the commandant. "Oil? Uranium? A stash of platinum?"

"I wouldn't know," Sam answered, "but we've still got orders to sniff around ourselves."

"I guess that makes sense," said the commandant, "even if they didn't find it. They took off for Old Home Week in Siberia just a couple of hours after you got here."

Sam and I exchanged glances. Had they found what we were looking for? Or hadn't they? And were they planning to come back?

We changed into our arctics and found the chopper waiting for us, loaded with all sorts of equipment and a lot of gadgetry whose function I couldn't even guess at. I found myself wondering whether it hadn't been put together at Chief Sam's order to confound any possible observers. The chopper wasn't one I was too familiar with, but I guessed rightly that Tom Conradin knew all about it, so I took the copilot's seat. He made a beautiful takeoff, with Veronica sitting as close to him as possible.

You never realize how small a world is until you've seen our own from far out in space, or so they tell me — but you never realize how vast it is, and how small *you* are, until you fly over it, and especially over those forbidding regions where the last Ice Age still lingers on. The miles of pack ice, first the tens and scores of miles,

then one hundred, two hundred, three—

Finally, as we neared the area Veronica's pendulum had selected for us, Chief Sam brought out the chart again, and, for his own reference, the photographs. The day was absolutely clear, and visibility was horizon to horizon. We were sure the Soviets would be observing us, and as we flew, Sam gave us instructions in how to put on a good show for them.

Now the pendulum was once again describing its figure eight, its symbol of infinity, but more decisively than it had before, without its previous tremors and hesitations — then abruptly Veronica cried out, "Colonel! Colonel Warhorse! See where the two loops of the eight are crossing? I feel it strongly there. Is it a place where we can land?"

Sam checked the chart. He checked the photograph. He and Tom Conradin carefully compared them with our assumed position. I looked out and down, to where Sam was pointing. There, a thousand feet below us, I saw a tilted plane of ice, almost a mile long and from half to three-quarters wide, high at one end as if the pack ice had pushed against and under it. It was a little smoother than the surrounding ice. We circled round it carefully, dropping lower with each tightening circle, Sam and I with our binoculars searching for signs of the Soviets' visit. We found them, but not on our tilted block. Their choppers

had landed on the rougher surrounding ice, apparently on two sides, and we could see the tracks of one or more vehicles of some sort, probably power sleds or snowmobiles.

"Where do you want us down, Veronica?" Tom asked.

She let her pendulum's point strike the chart. "There!" she answered.

It was pointing approximately at the center of our ice plate.

With infinite care, Tom brought us down. He switched off the turbos. We waited, looking at Veronica and at each other.

"We're close enough," she told us, and from a pocket she produced a forked twig, peeled and polished from much use, hazel or willow probably. But there were other things to do before she could begin to use it. We put on full arctic kits, face masks, heated gloves, everything. Then we unloaded, putting the instruments ostentatiously out onto the ice, stacking supplies and what, when set up, would be two igloo-shaped, insulated tents. Then we began to reconnoiter, and found that the Soviets had indeed looked over our own area, but — judging by their tracks — only cursorily. For an hour or two, we made a great show of wandering around with one or another of the instruments, making notes of our wholly mythical findings, and pretending to discuss matters seriously and excitedly. In the meantime, Veronica, with Tom always at her elbow, had started using her little

dowsing rod. He and she followed it from one creased ridge to another, always toward the elevated end. Finally, before the largest of a rough series of high hummocks, one that rose fifty or more feet, facing us with a forbidding scarp, they halted.

"*It is here!*" she said, in a very small voice. "*It is here, and it — it is alive!*" She pointed directly at the scarp. "Can we set the tents up here?"

"No reason why not," Chief Sam replied. We set to work, all of us except Veronica, and set them up in the hummock's lee, sheltered from the occasional gusts of wind that swept against it.

Then Sam turned to Marina. "Can you contact it?" he asked.

Before she answered him, she came to me, and though I could not see her face, I knew that she was scared. I put an arm around her.

"Contact it? Oh Sam, I'm not *sure*. But I feel that it is trying to contact *me* — at least to tell me something about — I suppose about itself. How can I put it? Remember what Veronica said about *despair*? I feel waves of it: great, dark, almost hopeless waves of it. Sam, I feel it's been deserted, abandoned, left all alone by those who put it here, whom it has always trusted."

"Marina, what *is* it?"

"Colonel Sam, I just don't *know*."

He weighed the next questions. "Has it a body? At least a body as we know them?"

"No!" she cried. "No, no, *no!* It knows what we're asking now. It's starting to understand through all that despair. It has no body: It — it's pure spirit. Oh, call it pure *mind!* It permeates this ice — only — only it's *not* ice, not this big block we're standing on. It's something else, something contrived by those who brought it here. It looks like frozen water, but it isn't. It sinks deeper into the sea, and it won't melt unless they want it to. Sam, it's been here *forever* — tens of thousands of years, a million maybe — and all that time this poor mind's been doing what it's supposed to do. Veronica, am I right? You can sense it, can't you?"

"Yes," said Veronica. "It doesn't speak in words, but then, it doesn't need to. I can feel everything more clearly now — now that it's learned to use your mind as, well, as a bridge — its terrible sadness, its abandonment, the mounting fear that drove it to shirk its duty for those two minutes, hoping that they'd — that *they'd* come back to — to cherish it." She shook her head, her sightless eyes weeping behind their protective goggles; and Tom Conradin held her close and murmured over her, words of comfort, of protection.

"My God!" Amy whispered. "It — it sounds almost human. That *need* —"

And suddenly, then, it happened. Slowly, in the frozen face of that harsh scarp, almost behind one of our

two tents, a door began to form, as though that ice that was not ice were melting. We stared at it open-mouthed and frightened, until it was wide enough to enter two abreast.

We moved toward it — and we were halted in our tracks, Sam and I, Amy and Marina. We did not feel that we had been halted. We simply ceased to move. And it was then I realized that *it* — whatever it might be — was not without its own defenses. Had it not been for the fact that Tom and Veronica were still advancing, we never would have known that we'd been stopped. We simply would have changed direction slightly and moved away.

But Tom and Veronica went on. Hand in hand, they walked into that chill doorway, and vanished through it.

The rest of us waited there. We waited at least a thousand years — even though our lying watches called it a mere ten minutes. Then, still hand in hand, they came out again, and the expression on their faces was one I had never really seen before, a combination of pure joy and sheer wonder.

"You can go in now," said Veronica. "Something incredible has happened. I'll tell you later." And she laughed aloud, a lovely bell-like laugh like a delighted child laughing.

"Yes, please go in," Tom urged. "Please, now."



Slowly we walked forward, first Sam and Amy, then I and Marina. We entered a long passageway that turned. We followed it around the corner.

We stood in a vast chamber — vast not so much for its size as for the amazement of its perspectives. Instantly I thought of Coleridge's words, *A sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice*, though of course it wasn't sunny.

It was not sunlit, no — but somehow it was lighted gloriously. Light filled it, corruscating from the translucent walls, swirling in their depths. We stood there amazed, for now we all could feel the Being that surrounded us in all its magnificent simplicity. We could feel its sorrow, its anguish, its very human guilt at its own dereliction. And at the same time, I felt suddenly — and so, I learned later, did all the others — that all this was in the past, that its purpose had been restored and the senseless void that had oppressed it suddenly filled with as great a happiness. Vaguely, too, I understood that now it perceived the design of those who had abandoned it, *why* they had done so, and — most important — why *we* were there.

The Soviets had come and gone, leaving behind them their litter and the aftertaste of their own sorrow, their fear of each other and of the secret police, and their absolute denial of what we could face as real, so that even the most sensitive among them had not dared to report what

they had sensed as clearly as had we. They had left, having nothing to report but failure.

They had come and gone, leaving it in an even deeper pit of despair than before.

Then Veronica and Tom had come there, radiating their love and harmony and fearlessness — and that, I saw suddenly, had changed everything.

After another thousand years, we saw that there was no further need for us to stay. We walked out slowly down the passage and through the door, which in utter silence closed shut behind us.

Tom and Veronica were standing there, facing each other.

She was *looking* at him.

"Yes," he whispered to us, awe and wonder in his voice. "*It* understood. For just a second, it gave me what I wished for, the — the —"

"The right to work one miracle," said Veronica.

Marina ran to her and kissed her; she kissed Tom. We clustered round them in our delight.

It was Chief Sam who finally brought us back to Earth. "Well," he told us, "I guess it's time we started back. We'll have to admit that, like the Russkies, we failed to find the Ultimate Weapon—"

He smiled at all of us. "But it's nice to know," he added softly, "That at least some of us have advanced to the point where we can cherish our

own guardian angel."

"And what about the one at the other end of the world?" asked Ma-

rina.

"I'm sure," replied Veronica, "that it got the message."



*"Hi there! I'd like to grant you three wishes with the exception of any in the areas of politics, ecology and state and local lotteries."*

*England's Robert Holdstock published one remarkable story in F&SF: "Mythago Wood," September 1981, recently expanded into and published as a novel. It's a pleasure to have him back with this fine tale of the building of a church on a ground inhabited by ancient spirits.*

# Thorn

BY

ROBERT HOLDSTOCK

**A**t sundown, when the masons and Guild carpenters finished their work for the day and trudged wearily back to their village lodgings, Thomas Wyatt remained behind in the half-completed church and listened to the voice of the stone man, calling to him.

The whispered sound was urgent, insistent: "Hurry! Hurry! I *must* be finished before the others. *Hurry!*"

Thomas, hiding in the darkness below the gallery, felt sure that the ghostly cry could be heard for miles around. But the watchman, John Tagworthy, was almost completely deaf now, and the priest was too involved with his own holy rituals to be aware of the way his church was being stolen.

Thomas could hear the priest. He was circling the new church twice, as he always did at sundown. He carried

*for Richard Cowper*

a small, smoking censer in one hand, a book in the other. He walked from right to left. Demons, and the ghostly sprites on the old earth, flew before him, birds and bats in the darkening sky. The priest, like all the men who worked on the church — except for Thomas himself — was a stranger to the area. His hair was long, and he had a dark, trimmed beard; an unusual look for a monk.

He talked always about the Supreme Holiness of the place where his church was being built. He kept a close eye on the work of the craftsmen. He prayed to the north and the south, and constantly was to be seen kneeling at the very apex of the mound, as if exorcising the ancient spirits buried there.

This was Dancing Hill. Before the stone church there had been a wooden church, and some said that Saint

Peter himself had raised the first timbers. And hadn't Joseph, bearing the Grail of Christ, rested on this very spot, and driven out the demons from the earth mound?

But it was Dancing Hill. On mid-winter's eve, spikes of the four great woods were secretly buried in the mound, and stories were told of the very first church that had stood there; and of the four great trees that had grown around it, each trunk carved into the shape of a dancing man.

Sometimes it was referred to by its older name, *Ynys Calidryv*, isle of the old fires. And there were other names, too, but they were forgotten now.

"Hurry!" called the stone man from his hidden niche. Thomas felt the cold walls vibrate with the voice of the specter. He shivered as he felt the power of the earth returning to the carved ragstone pillars, to the neatly positioned blocks. Always at night.

The watchman's fire crackled and flared in the lee of the south wall. The priest walked away, down the hill to the village. He stopped just once to stare back at the half-constructed shell of the first stone church in the area. Then he was gone.

Thomas stepped from the darkness, staring up through the empty roof to the clouds and the sky, and the gleaming light that was Jupiter. His heart was beating fast, but a great relief touched his limbs and his mind.

And as always, he smiled, then closed his eyes for a moment. He thought of what he was doing. He thought of Beth, of what she would say if she knew his secret work. Sweet Beth. With no children to comfort her, she was now more alone than ever. But it would not be for much longer. The face was nearly finished. . . .

*"Hurry!"*

A few more nights. A few more hours working in darkness, and all the watchman's best efforts to guard the church will have been in vain.

The church will have been stolen. Thomas will have been the thief!

He moved through the gloom now, to where a wooden ladder lay against the side wall. He placed the ladder against the high gallery — the leper's gallery — and climbed it. He drew the ladder up behind him and stepped across the debris of wood, stone, and leather to the farthest, tightest corner of the place. Bare faces of the coarse ragstone watched the silent church. No mortar joined the stones. Their weight held them secure. They supported nothing but themselves.

At Thomas's muscular insistence, one of them moved and came away from the others.

With twilight gone but night not yet fully descended, there was enough gray light for him to see the face that was carved there. He stared at the leafy beard; the narrowed, slanting eyes; the wide, flaring nostrils. He saw how the cheeks would look, how

the hair would become spiky, how he would include the white and red berries of witch-thorn upon the twigs that clustered round the face. . . .

All carved from the stone.

Thomas stared at Thorn, and Thorn watched him by return, a cold smile on cold stone lips. Voices whispered in a sound realm that was neither in the church nor in hell, but somewhere between the two, a shadow land of voice, movement, and memory.

"I must be finished before the others," the stone man whispered.

"You shall be," said the mason, selecting chisel and hammer from his leather bag. "Be patient."

"I must be finished before the magic ones!" Thorn insisted, and Thomas sighed with irritation.

"You *shall* be finished before the magic ones. No one has agreed upon the design of their faces yet."

The "magic ones" were what Thorn called the Apostles. The twelve statues were laid out in the area of the altar, bodies completed but faces still smoothly blank. Why Thorn feared them as "magic" things, Thomas had no idea.

"To control them I must be here first," Thorn said.

"I've already opened your eyes. You can see how the other faces are incomplete."

"Open them better," said Thorn.

"Very well."

Thomas reached out to the stone face. He touched the lips, the nose,

the eyes. He knew every prominence, every rill, every chisel mark. The grains of the stone were like pebbles beneath his touch. He could feel the hard-stone intrusion below the right eye, where the rag would not chisel well. There was a hardness, too, in the crown of thorns, a blemish in the soft rock that would have to be shaped carefully to avoid cracking the whole design. As his fingers ran across the thorn man's lips, cold, old breath tickled him, the woodland man breathing from his time in the long past. As Thomas touched the eyes, he felt the eyeballs move, impatient to see better.

*I am in a wood grave, and a thousand years lie between us*, Thorn had said. *Hurry, burry. Bring me back.*

In the deepening darkness, working by touch alone, Thomas chiseled the face, bringing back the life of the lost god. The sound of his work was a sequence of shrill notes, stone music in the still church. John Tagworthy, outside by the fire, would be unaware of them. He might see a tallow candle by its glow upon the clouds; he might smell a fart from the distant castle on a still summer's night — but the noises of man and nature had long since ceased to bother his senses.

"Thomas! Thomas Wyatt! Where in God's Name *are* you?"

The voice, hailing him from below, so shocked Thomas that he dropped his chisel, and in desperate-

ly trying to catch the tool he cut himself. He stayed silent for a long moment, cursing Jupiter and the sudden band of bright stars for their light. The church was a place of shadows against darkness. As he peered at the north arch, he thought he could see a man's shape, but it was only an unfinished timber. He reached for the heavy stone block that would cover the stone face, and as he did so, the voice came again.

"God take your gizzard, Thomas Wyatt! It's Simon. Miller's son Simon!"

Thomas crept to the gallery's edge and peered over. The movement drew attention to him, and Simon's pale features turned to look up at him. "I heard you working. What are you working on?"

"Nothing," Thomas lied. "Practicing my craft on good stone with good tools."

"Show me the face, Thomas," said the younger man, and Thomas felt the blood drain from his head. *How bad he known?* Simon was twenty years old, married for three years and still, like Thomas himself, childless. He was a freeman, of course; he worked in his father's mill but spent a lot of his time in the fields, both his family's strips and the land belonging to the castle. His great ambition, though, was to be a Guildsman, and masonry was his aspiration.

"What face?" Thomas whispered uncomfortably.

"Send down the ladder," Simon urged, and reluctantly Thomas let the wood scaffold down. The miller clambered up to the gallery, breathing hard. He smelled of garlic. He looked eagerly about in the gloom. "Show me the green man."

"Explain what you mean."

"Come on, Thomas! Everybody knows you're shaping the Lord of Wood. I want to see him. I want to know how he looks."

Thomas could hardly speak. His heart alternately stopped and raced. Simon's words were like stab wounds. *Everybody knew! How could everybody know?*

Thorn had spoken to him and to him alone. He had sworn the mason to silence and secrecy. For thirty days, Thomas Wyatt had risked not just a flogging, but almost certain hanging for blasphemy; had risked his life for the secret realm. *Everybody knew?*

"If everybody knows, why haven't I been stopped?"

"I don't mean *everybody*," Simon said as he felt blindly along the cold walls for a sign of Thomas's work. "I mean the village. It's spoken in whispers. You're a hero, Thomas. We know what you're doing, and for whom. It's exciting; it's *right*. I've danced with them at the forest cross. I've carried the fire. I *know* how much power remains here. I may take God's name in oath — but that's safe to do. He has no power over me, or any of us. He doesn't belong on Dancing Hill. Don't

worry, Thomas. We're your friends. . . . Ah!"

Simon had found the loose stone. It was heavy, and he grunted loudly as he took its weight, letting it down carefully to the floor. His breathing grew soft as he reached for the stone face. But Thomas could see how the young man drew back, fingers extended yet not touching the precious icon.

"There's magic in this, Thomas," Simon said in awe.

"There's skill — working by night, working with fear — there's skill enough, I'll say that."

"There's magic in the face," Simon repeated. "It's drawing power from the earth below. It's tapping the Dancing Well. There's water in the eyes, Thomas. The dampness of the old well. The face is brilliant,"

He struggled with the covering stone and replaced it. "I wish it had been me. I wish the green man had chosen me. What an honor, Thomas. Truly."

Thomas Wyatt watched his friend in astonishment. Was this *really* Simon the miller's son? Was this the young man who had carried the Cross every Resurrection Sunday for ten years? Simon Miller! *I've danced with them at the forest cross.*

"Whom have you danced with at the crossroads, Simon?"

"You know," Simon whispered. "It's alive, Thomas. It's all alive. It's here, around us. It never went away.

The Lord of Wood showed us. . . ."

"Thorn? Is that who you mean?"

"Him!" Simon pointed toward the hidden niche. "He's been here for years. He came the moment the monks decided to build the church. He came to save us, Thomas. And you're helping. I envy you. . . ."

Simon climbed down the ladder. He was a furtive night shape, darting to the high arch where an oak door would soon be fitted, and out across the mud-churned hill, back round the forest, to where the village was a dark place, sleeping.

Thomas followed him down, placing the ladder back against the wall. But on the open hill, almost in sight of the watchman's fire, he looked to the north, across the forest, to where the ridgeway was a high band of darkness against the pale gray glow of the clouds. Below the ridgeway a fire burned. He knew that he was looking at the forest cross, where the stone road of the Romans crossed the disused track between Wudeherst and Bidindenne villages. He had played there as a child, despite being told never *ever* to follow the broken stone road.

There was a clearing at the deserted crossroads, and years ago he and Simon Miller's elder brother Wat had often found the remains of fire and feasts. Outlaws, of course, or the night meals of the brave Saxon knights who journeyed the hidden forest trails until summoned to pro-

test the innocent. Any other reason for the use of the place would have been unthinkable. Why, there was even an old gibbet, where forest justice was seen to be done. . . .

With a shiver, he remembered the time when he had come to the clearing and seen the swollen, grayish corpse of a man swinging from that blackened wood. Dark birds had been perched upon its shoulders. The face had had no eyes, no nose, no flesh at all, and the sight of the dead villain had stopped him from ever going back again.

Now a fire burned at forest cross. A fire like the fire of thirty nights ago, when Thorn had sent the woman for him. . . .

**H**e had woken to the sound of his name being called from outside. His wife, Beth, slept soundly on, turning slightly on the straw-filled pallet. It had been a warm night. He had tugged on his britches and drawn a linen shirt over his shoulders. Stepping outside, he had disturbed a hen, which clucked angrily and stalked to another resting place.

The woman was dressed in dark garments. Her head was covered by a shawl. She was young, though, and the hand that reached for his was soft and pale.

"Who are you?" he said, drawing back. She had tugged at him. His reluctance to go with her was partly fear, partly concern that Beth would

see him.

"Iagus craagoth! Fiatha! *Fiatha!*" Her words were strange to Thomas. They were *like* the hidden language (which he had never been allowed to learn). but were not of the same tongue.

"Who *are* you?" he insisted, and the woman sighed, still holding his hand. At last she pointed to her bosom. Her eyes were bright beneath the covering of the shawl. Her hair was long, and he sensed it to be red. like fire. "Anuth!" she said. She pointed distantly. "Thorn. You come with Thorn. With Anuth. Me. *Come*. Thomas. Thomas to Thorn. *Fiatha!*"

She dragged at his hand, and he began to run. The grip on his fingers relaxed. She ran ahead of him, skirts swirling, body hunched. He tripped in the darkness, but she seemed able to see every low-hanging branch and raised beechwood root on the track. They entered the wood. He concentrated on her fleeing shape, calling occasionally for her to slow down. Each time he went sprawling, she came back, making clicking sounds with her mouth, impatient, anxious. She helped him to his feet but immediately took off into the forest depths, heedless of risk to life and limb.

All at once he heard voices, a rhythmic beating, the crackle of fire . . . and the gentle sound of running water. She had brought him to the river. It wound through the forest, and then across downland, toward



the Avon.

Through the trees he saw the fire. Anuth took his hand and pulled him, not to the bright glade, but toward the stream. As he walked, he stared at the flames. Dark, human shapes passed before the fire. They seemed to be dancing. The heavy rhythm was like the striking of one bone against another. The voices were singing. The language was familiar to him, but incomprehensible.

Anuth dragged him past the firelit glade. He came to the river, and she slipped away. Surprised, he turned, hissing her name. But she had vanished. He looked back at the water, where starlight and the light of a quarter moon made the surface seem alive. There was a thick-trunked thorn tree growing from the water's edge. The thorn tree trembled and shifted in the evening wind.

The thorn tree grew before the startled figure of Thomas Wyatt. It rose; it straightened, it stretched. Arms, legs, the gleam of moonlight on eyes and teeth.

"Welcome, Thomas," said the thorn tree.

He took a step backward, frightened by the apparition.

"Welcome where?"

In front of him, Thorn laughed. The man's voice rasped, like a child with the consumption. "Look around you, Thomas. Tell me what you see."

"Darkness. Woodland. A river, stars. Night. Cold night."

"Take a breath, Thomas. What do you smell?"

"That same night. The river. Leaves and dew. The fire, I can smell the fire. And autumn. All the smells of autumn."

"When did you last see and smell these things?"

Thomas, confused by the strange midnight encounter, shivered in his clothing. "Last night. I've always seen and smelled them."

"Then welcome to a place you know well. Welcome to the always place. Welcome to an autumn night, something that this land has always known, and will always enjoy."

"But who are you?"

"I have been known by many names." He came close to the trembling man. His hawthorn crown, with its strange horns, was like a broken tree against the clouds. His beard of leaves and long grass rustled as he spoke. His body quivered where the night breeze touched the clothing of nature that wound around his torso. "Do you believe in God, Thomas?"

"He died for us. His son. On the Cross. He is the Almighty. . . ."

Thorn raised his arms. He held them sideways. He was a great cross in the cold night, and his crown of thorns was a beast's antlers. Old fears, forgotten shudders, plagued the villager, Thomas Wyatt. Ancestral cries mocked him. Memories of fire whispered words in the hidden language; confused his mind.

"I am the Cross of God," said Thorn. "Touch the wood; touch the sharp thorns. . . ."

Thomas reached out. His actions were not his own. His fingers touched the cold flesh of the man's stomach. He felt the ridged muscle in the cross-beam, the bloody points of the thorns that rose from the man's head. He nervously brushed the gnarled wood of the thighs, and the thick oak branch that rose between them, hot to his fingers, nature's passion, never dying.

"What do you want of me?" Thomas asked quietly.

The cross became a man again. "To make my image in the new shrine. To make that shrine my own. To make it as mine forever, no matter what manner of worship is performed within its walls. . . ."

Thomas stared at the Lord of Wood. "Why not do it yourself?"

Thorn laughed. "I am in a wood grave, Thomas, and a thousand years lie between us. What you see before you is an image of the god. A man. The servant of the god. To bring me back, my image must be made in stone. Hurry, Thomas. Hurry: Bring me back to the world."

"Tell me what I must do. . . ."

Everybody knew, Simon had said. Everybody in the village. It was spoken in whispers. Thomas was a hero. Everybody knew. Everybody but Thomas Wyatt.

"Why have they kept it from me?"

he murmured to the night. He had huddled up inside his jacket, and folded his body into the tight shelter of a wall bastion. The encounter with Simon had shaken him badly.

From here he could see north to Bidindenne across the gloomy shapelessness of the forest. The castle, and the clustered villages of its demesne, were behind him. He saw only stars, pale clouds, and the flicker of fire, where strange worship occurred.

Why did the fire, in this midnight forest, call to him so much? Why was there such comfort in the thought of the warm glow from the piled branches, and the noisy chatter, and laughter, of those who clustered in its shadowy light? He had danced about a fire often enough: on midsummer eve, and at the passing of the day of All Hallows. But those fires were in the village bounds. His soul fluttered, a delighted bird, at the thought of the woodland fire. The smell of autumn, the touch of night's dew, the closeness to the souls of tree and plant; timeless eyes would watch the dancers. They were a shared life with the forest.

Why had he been kept in isolation? *Everybody knew*. The villagers who carried the bleeding, dying Christ through the streets on Resurrection Sunday . . . were they now carrying images of boar and stag and hare about the fire? He — Thomas — was a hero. They spoke of him in whispers. Everybody knew of his work. When

had *they* been taken back to the beliefs of old? Had Thorn appeared to each of them as well?

Why didn't he *share* the new belief with them? It was the same belief. He used his craft; they danced for the gods.

As if he were of the same cold stone-stuff upon which he worked, the others kept him distant, watched him from afar. Did Beth know? Thomas shivered. The hours passed. He could feel the gibbet rope around his neck. Only one word out of place, one voice overheard — one whisper to the wrong man, and Thomas Wyatt would be a gray thing, slung by its neck, prey for dark birds. Eyes, nose, the flesh of the face. Every feature that he pecked for Thorn with hammer and chisel would be pecked from him by hard, wet beaks.

From the position of the moon, Thomas realized he had been sitting by the church for several hours. John the watchman had not walked past. Now that he thought of it, Thomas could hear the man's snoring, coming as if from a far place.

Thomas eased himself to his feet. He lifted his bag gently to his shoulder, overcautious about the ring and strike of iron tools within the leather. But as he walked toward the path, he heard movement in the church. The watchman snored distantly.

It must be Simon, Thomas thought, back for another look at the face of the woodland god.

Irritated, and still confused, Thomas stepped into the church again and looked toward the gallery. The ladder was against the balcony. He could hear the stone being moved. There was a time of silence; then the stone was put back. A figure moved to the ladder and began to descend.

Thomas watched in astonishment. He stepped into greater darkness as the priest looked round, then hauled the ladder back to its storage place. All Thomas heard was the sound of the priest's laughter. The man passed through the gloom, long robe swirling through the dust and debris.

**E**ven the priest knew! And that made no sense at all. Thomas slept restlessly, listening to the soft breathing of his wife. Several times the urge to wake her, to speak to her, made him whisper her name and shake her shoulders. But she slumbered on. At sunrise they were up together, but he was so tired he could hardly speak. They ate hard bread, moistened with cold, thin gruel. Thomas tipped the last of their ale into a clay mug. The drink was meatier than the gruel, but he swallowed the sour liquid and felt its warming tingle.

"The last of the ale," he said ruefully, tapping the barrel.

"You've been too busy to brew," Beth said from the table. "And I'm not skilled." She was wrapped in a heavy wool cloak. The fire was a dead

place in the middle of the small room. Gray ash drifted in the light from the roof hole.

"But no *ale!*" He banged his cup on the barrel in frustration. Beth looked up at him, surprised by his anger.

"We can get ale from the miller. We've done it before and repaid him from our own brewing. It's not the end of the world."

"I've had no time to brew," Thomas said, watching Beth through hooded, rimmed eyes. "I've been working on something of importance. I expect you know what."

She shrugged. "Why would I know? You never talk about it." Her pale face was sweet. She was as pretty now as when he had married her; fuller in body, yes, and wiser in the ways of life. That they were childless had not affected her spirit. She had allowed the wise women to dose her with herbs and bitter spices, to take her to strange standing stones and stranger foreigners. She had been seen by apothecaries and doctors, and Thomas had worked in their fields to pay them. Thomas had been examined too, and he had worked even harder.

And of course, they prayed.

Now Thomas felt too old to care about children. Life was good with Beth, and their sadness had drawn them closer than most couples he knew.

"Everybody knows what I'm work-

ing on," he said bitterly.

"Well, I don't," she replied. "But I'd like to. . . ."

Perhaps he had been unfair to her. Perhaps she, too, was kept apart from the village's shared knowledge. He lied to her. "You must not say a word to anyone. But I'm working on the face of . . . of Jesus."

Beth was delighted. "Oh Thomas! That's wonderful. I'm so proud of you." She came round to him and hugged him. Outside, Master Mason Tobias Craven called out his name, among others, and he trudged up to the church on Dancing Hill.

His work was uneven and lazy that day. The chisel slipped; the stone splintered; the hammer caught his thumb twice. He was distracted and deeply concerned by what he had seen the night before. When the priest came to the church, to walk through the bustle of activity and inspect the day's progress, Thomas watched him carefully, hoping for some sign of recognition. But the man just smiled and nodded, then carried the small light of Christ to the altar, where he said silent prayers for an hour or more.

At sundown, Thomas felt his body shaking. When the priest called the craftsmen into the vestry for wine, Thomas stood by the door, staring at the dark features of the Man of God. The priest, handing him his cup, merely said, "God be with you, Thomas." It was what he always said.

Tobias Craven came over to him. His face was gray with dust, his clothing heavy with dirt. His dialect was difficult for Thomas to understand, and Thomas was suspicious of the gesture anyway. Would he now discover that the foreigners, too, knew of the face of the woodland diety, half completed behind its door of stone?

"Your work is good, Thomas. Not today, perhaps, but usually. I've watched you."

"Thank you."

"At first I was reluctant to allow you to work as a mason among us. It was at the priest's insistence: one local man to work in every craft. It seemed a superstitious idea to me. But now I'm glad. I approve. It's an enlightened gesture, I realize, to allow local men, not of the Guilds, to display their skills. And your skill is remarkable."

Thomas swallowed hard. "To be a Guildsman would be a great honor."

Master Tobias looked crestfallen. "Aye, but alas. I wish I had seen your work when you were fifteen, not twenty-five. But I can write a note for you, to get better work in the area."

"Thank you," Thomas said again.

"Have you traveled, Thomas?"

"Only to Glaestingeberia. I made a pilgrimage in the third year of my marriage."

"Glaestingeberia," Master Tobias repeated, smiling. "Now that is a fine abbey. I've seen it just once. Myself, I worked at Euerwik and at Caerleoil,

on the Minsters. I was not a Master then, of course. But that was cherished work. Now I'm a Guild Master, building tiny churches in remote places. But it gives fulfillment to the soul, and one day I shall die and be buried in the shadow of a place I have built myself. There is satisfaction in the thought."

"May that not be for many years."

"Thank you, Thomas." Tobias drained his cup. "And now, from God's work to Nature's work—"

Thomas paled. Did he mean woodland worship? The Master Mason winked at him.

"A good night's sleep!"

When the others had gone, Thomas slipped out of the sheltering woodland and made his way back to the church. The watchman was fussing with his fire. There was less cloud this evening, and the land, though murky, was quite visible for many miles around.

Inside the church, Thomas looked up at the gallery. Uncertainty made him hesitate; then he shook his head. "Until I understand better. . . ." he murmured, and made to turn for home.

"Thomas!" Thorn called. "Hurry, Thomas."

Strange green light played off the stone of the church. It darted around him like will-o'-the-wisp. Fingers prodded him forward, but when he turned, there was nothing but shadow.

Again Thorn called to him.

With a sigh, Thomas placed the ladder against the gallery and climbed up to the half-finished face. Thorn smiled at him. The narrow eyes sparkled with moisture. The leaves and twigs that formed his hair and beard seemed to rustle. The stone strained to move.

"Hurry, Thomas. Open my eyes better."

"I'm frightened," the man said. "Too many people know what I'm doing."

"Carve me. Shape my face. I must be here before the others. *Hurry!*"

The lips of the forest god twitched with the ghostly figure's anguish. Thomas reached out to the cold stone and felt its stillness. It was just a carving. It had no life. He imagined the voice. It was just a man who had told him to make the carving, a man dressed in woodland disguise. Until he knew he was safe, he would not risk discovery. He climbed back down the ladder. Thorn called to him, but Thomas ignored the cry.

At his house a warm fire burned in the middle of the room, and an iron pot of thick vegetable broth steamed above it. There was fresh ale from the miller, and Beth was pleased to see him home so early. She stitched old clothes, seated on a low stool, close to the wood fire. Thomas ate, then drank ale, leaning on the table, his mason's tools spread out before him. The ale was strong and soon went to

his head. He felt dizzy, sublimely detached from his body. The warmth, the sensation of drunkenness, his full stomach — all of these things made him drowsy, and slowly his head sank to his arms. . . .

A cold blast of air on his neck roused him. His name was being called. At first he thought it was Beth, but soon, as he surfaced from pleasant oblivion, he recognized the rasping voice of Thorn.

The fire burned high, fanned by the draft from the open door. Beth still sat on her stool, but was motionless and silent, staring at the flames. He spoke her name, but she didn't respond. Thorn call to him again, and he looked out at the dark night. He felt a sudden chill of fear. He gathered his tools into his bag and stepped from the house.

Thorn stood in the dark street, a tall figure, his horns of wood black against the sky. There was a strong smell of earth about him. He moved toward Thomas, leaf-clothes rustling.

"The work is unfinished, Thomas."

"I'm afraid for my life. Too many people know what I'm doing."

"Only the finishing of the face matters. Your fear is of no consequence. You agreed to work for me. You must go to the church. Now."

"But if I'm caught!"

"Then another will be found. Go back to the work, Thomas. Open my eyes properly. It *must* be done."

He turned from Thorn and sighed.

There was something wrong with Beth, and it worried him, but the persuasive power of the night figure was too strong to counter, and he began to walk wearily toward the church. Soon the village was invisible behind him. Soon the church was a sharp relief against the night sky. The watchman's fire burned high, and the autumn night was sweet with the smell of woodsmoke. The watchman himself seemed to be dancing, or so Thomas thought at first. He strained to see better, and soon realized that John had fallen asleep and set light to his clothing. He was brushing and beating at his leggings, his grunts of alarm like the evening call of a boar.

The moment's humor passed, and a sudden anger took Thomas. Thorn's words were like knife cuts to his pride: his fear was of no consequence. Only the work of carving mattered. He would be caught, and it would be of no consequence. He would swing, slowly strangling, from the castle gallows, and it would be of no consequence. Another would be found!

"No!" he said aloud. "No. I will *not* work for Thorn tonight. Tonight is *my* night. Damn Thorn. Damn the face. Tomorrow I will open its eyes, but not now."

And with a last glance at the watchman, who had extinguished the fire and settled down again, he turned back to the village

. . .

**B**ut as he approached his house, aware of the glow of the fire through the small window, his anger changed to a sudden dread. He began to feel sick. He wanted to cry out, to alert the village. A voice in his head urged him to turn and go back to the night wood. His house, once so welcoming, threatened him deeply. It seemed surrounded by an aura, detached from the real world.

He walked slowly to the small window. He could hear the crackle and spit of the flames. Woodsmoke was stong in the air. Somewhere, at the village bounds, two dogs barked.

The feeling of apprehension in him grew, a strangling weed that made him dizzy. But he looked through the window. And he did not faint, nor cry out, at what he saw within, though a part of his spirit, part of his life, flew away from him then, abandoning him, making him wither and age; making him die a little.

Thorn stood with his back to the fire. His mask of autumn leaves and spiky wood was bright and eerie — dark hair curled, from beneath the mask. His arms were wound around the creeper and twine, and twigs of oak, elm, and lime were laced upon this binding. Save for these few fragments of nature's clothing, he was naked. The black hair on his body gave him the appearance of a burned

oak stump, gnarled and weathered by years. His manhood was a smooth, dark branch, cut to the length of firewood.

Beth was on her knees before him, her weight taken on her elbows. Her skirts were on the floor beside her. The yellow flames cast a flickering glow upon her plump, pale flesh, and Thomas half closed his eyes in despair. He managed to stifle his scream of anguish, but he could not stop himself from watching.

And he uttered no sound, despite the pain, as Thorn dropped down upon the waiting woman.

As he ran to the church, the watchman woke, then stood up, picking up his heavy staff. Thomas Wyatt knocked him down, then drew a flaming wood brand from the brazier. Toolbag on his shoulder, he entered the church and held the fire high. the ladder was against the balcony. Pale features peered down at him, and the ladder began to move. But Simon, the miller's son, was not quite quick enough. Casting the burning wood aside, Thomas leapt for the scaffold and began to ascend.

"I was just looking, Thomas," Simon cried, then tried to fling the ladder back. Thomas clutched at the balcony, then hauled himself to safety. He said no word to Simon, who backed against the wall where the loose stone was fitted.

"You mustn't touch him, Thomas."

In the darkness, Simon's eyes were gleaming orbs of fear. Thomas took him by the shoulders and flung him to the balcony, then used a stone to strike him.

"No, Thomas! No!"

The younger man had toppled over the balcony. He held on for dear life, fingers straining to hold his weight.

"Tricked!" screamed Thomas. "All a trick! Duped! Cuckolded! All of you knew. All of you *knew!*"

"No, Thomas. In the Name of the God, it wasn't like that!"

His hammer was heavy. He swung it high, brought it down hard. Simon's left hand vanished, and the man's scream of pain was deafening.

"She had no other way!" he cried hysterically. "No, Thomas! No! She chose it! She *chose* it! Thorn's gift to you both."

The hammer swung. Crushed fingers left bloody marks upon the balcony. Simon crashed to the floor below and was still.

"All of you knew!" Thomas Wyatt cried. He wrenched the loose stone away. Thorn watched him from the blackness through his half-opened eyes. Thomas could see every feature, every line. The mouth stretched in a mocking grin. The eyes narrowed; the nostrils flared.

"Fool. Fool!" whispered the stone man. "But you cannot stop me now."

Thomas slapped his hand against the face. The blow stung his flesh. He reached for his chisel, placed the sharp



tool against one of the narrow eyes.

"NO!" screeched Thorn. His face twisted and turned. The stone of the church shuddered and groaned. Thomas hesitated. A green glow came from the features of the diety. The eyes were wide with fear, the lips drawn back below the mask. Thomas raised his hammer.

"NO!" screamed the head again. Arms reached from the wall. The light expanded. Thomas backed off, terrified by the specter that had appeared there, a ghastly green version of Thorn himself, a creature half ghost, half stone, tied to the wall of the church but reaching out from the cold rock, reaching for Thomas Wyatt, reaching to kill him.

Thomas raised the chisel, raised the hammer. He ran back to the face of Thorn and, with a single, vicious blow, drove a gouging furrow through the right eye.

The church shuddered. A block of stone fell from the high wall, striking Thomas on the shoulder. The whole gallery vibrated with Thorn's pain and anger.

Again he struck. The left eye cracked, a great split in the stone. Dampness oozed from the wound. The scream from the wall was deafening. Below the gallery, yellow light glimmered: the watchman, staring up to where Thomas performed his deed of vengeance.

Then a crack appeared down the whole side of the church. The entire

gallery where Thomas had worked dropped by a man's height, and Thomas was flung to the parapet. He struggled to keep his balance, then went over the wall, scrabbling at the air. Thorn's stone-scream was a nightmare sound. Air was cool on the mason's skin. A stone pedestal broke his fall. Broke his back.

**T**he village woke to the sound of the priest's terrible scream. He stumbled from the Wyatts' house, hands clutching at his eyes, trying to staunch the flow of blood. He scrabbled at the wood mask, stripping away the thorn, the oak, the crisp brown leaves, exposing dark hair, a trimmed dark beard.

The priest — Thorn's priest — turned blind eyes to the church. Naked, he began to stagger and stumble toward the hill. Behind him the villagers followed, torches burning in the night.

Thomas lay across the marble pillar, a few feet from the ground. There was no sensation in his body, though his lungs expanded to draw air into his chest. He lay like a sacrificial victim, arms above his head, legs limp. The watchman circled him in silence. The church was still.

Soon the priest approached him, hands stretched out before him. the pierced orbs of his eyes glistened as he leaned close to Thomas Wyatt.

"Are you dying, then?"

"I died a few minutes ago," Thomas whispered. The priest's hands on his face were gentle. Blood dripped from the savaged eyes.

"Another will come," Thorn said. "There are many of us. The work will be completed. The Lord of Wood directs us. No church will stand that is not a shrine to the true faith. The image of the Green will be in every one of them. The spirit of this Christ will find few havens in England."

"Beth. . . ." Thomas whispered. He could feel the bird of life struggling to escape him. The watchman's torch was already dimming.

Thorn raised Thomas's head, a fin-

ger across the dry lips. "You should not have seen," said the priest. "It was a gift for a gift. Our skills, the way of ritual, of fertility, for your skill with stone. Another will come to replace me. Another will be found to finish your work. But there will be no child for you now. No child for Beth."

"What have I done?" Thomas whispered. "By all that's Holy, what have I done?"

From above him, from a thousand miles away, came the ring of chisel on stone.

"Hurry," he heard Thorn call into the night. "Hurry!"

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# Saucery

BY

FREDERIK POHL

**T**he young talent booker behind the desk was slim, quick, heavily eye-shadowed, and, Boccanegra decided, quite ugly, and he hated her.

He didn't much like her office either. It was tiny and bare. It didn't do justice to one of the richest television networks in the world, and besides, the woman was watching the wrong program. All of this displeased Marchese Boccanegra. Not that he cared that somebody on the NBC payroll was sneaking looks at an offering of CBS, but the program the confounded woman was watching was a pickup from the spaceship *Algonquin*, on its way back from Mars with a bunch of those equally confounded Martians aboard. Nasty-looking things! People said they looked a little bit like seals, but seals at least didn't have spindly legs. No, they were definitely hideous, although it wasn't their

looks that made Boccanegra dislike them.

The woman giggled. "They're cute," she said, to Boccanegra or to no one.

Boccanegra sighed — silently. He sat erect in his far from comfortable wooden chair, his hands folded reposefully on his lap, his expression unchanging and his eyes half closed. He could see her well enough. Her nose was hardly more than a pug, and her teeth, although white enough and bright enough, were unacceptably long. She was at least as unattractive as the Martians, not to mention that she wasn't treating him right. First there had been forty-five minutes in the waiting room outside, with all the jugglers and struggling comics and publicity agents for people who had just written a book. Then, when she did let him in, most of her atten-

tion was on the TV screen, when what she should properly have been doing was to decide exactly when—Boccanegra did not allow himself to say “whether” — he would appear again on the “Today” show.

Boccanegra didn't realize his half-closed eyes had closed all the way until he heard her say irritably, “What's the matter, are you asleep?”

He opened his eyes slowly and gazed at her with the unfathomable look that had always gone so well on television. “I am not asleep,” he said austere.

She was looking less attractive than ever, because she was scowling at him, but at least she had turned off the television set. “I hope you wouldn't fall asleep on the air,” she sniffed. “Sorry about that, but I had to watch. Anyway, how do you say your name?”

“Mar-KAY-say BOH-ka-NAY-gra.”

“You can really get screwed up trying to say those foreign names on the air,” she said pensively. “What's that first part, a title or a name?”

He allowed himself to twinkle. “It is the name my parents bestowed on me,” he said, not truthfully. “It does in fact mean ‘marquis,’ but my family have not used a title for more than a hundred years.” That was not untruthful, technically, for they certainly hadn't. Or before then, either, because grape growers hardly ever had one.

“In any case,” he went on smooth-

ly, “I don't know if you have had an opportunity to study my sitrep. This latest contact—”

“What in the world is a sitrep?”

“The situation report, that is. It details my latest contact with the Great Galactics, which is actually far more exciting than any I have experienced before. I was meditating before the fireplace in my summer home at Aspen, when suddenly the flames of the fire seemed to die away and a great golden presence emerged to—”

“You told me,” she said. “They talked to you. What I need to find out is what they said about the Martians.”

“Martians? My dear woman, they aren't *Martians*! The Great Galactics come from so far beyond Mars that they are in another universe entirely, which we call the *Theta* band of consciousness—”

“Uh-uh. The people aren't interested in other universes right now, Mr. —” she glanced at her notes and pronounced it, for a wonder, almost correctly — “Boccanegra. I'm booking a particular show. I've got one three-and-a-half-minute spot open, and the show's about Mars. We've already got Sagan, Bradbury, and some woman from NASA, and we need a—we need somebody like you, I mean. Now, you've had other experiences with flying saucers, right?”

He said patiently, “‘Flying saucers’ is a newspaper term. I don't care for it. In my book, *Ultimate Truth: The Amazing Riddle Behind the ‘Sau-*

cer' *Flaps*, I expose the falsity of the so-called flying saucer stories. On the *Theta* level of reality, what we human beings perceive as 'saucers' are really—"

"No, but, whatever they were, did any of them come from Mars?"

"Of course not!" Then he added hastily, "Naturally, on the other hand, most of the so-called Martian mysteries are explained in my book — as, for example, the huge stone sculpture of a human face that appears on Mars in—"

"No, no, no face. We've already got the guy who wrote the book doing that on the 8:18 spot on Tuesday. Anything else about Mars?" she asked, glancing at her watch.

"No," said Boccanegra, coming to a decision. He had been in the business long enough to know when to cut his losses. She wasn't buying. He would not do the "Today" show on the basis of this interview. All he could do was to try to keep the lines open for the future.

As she was opening her mouth for the don't-call-us-we'll-call-you, he widened his eyes and said quickly, "Oh, just a moment, do you mean *next* week? I am so terribly sorry! My staff must have got the dates wrong, because next week I have to be at a conference in Washington." He gave the woman a meager, forbearing smile as he stood up and shrugged apologetically.

As he picked up the gray suede

gloves and gold-handled walking stick, the woman said, "Well, actually—"

"No, I insist," Boccanegra cut in. "It's entirely my fault. Good day!" And he was gone, not even pausing to admire his reflection in the full-length mirror on the back of her door. It was just as it ought to be anyway. Tall, spare figure in the severely cut black suit, the moon-white stock gleaming at his throat and the white carnation in his lapel, he was exactly as striking and vaguely sinister a spectacle as he set out to be. *Color*, the well-meaning had said to him. *It's all color on the TV now*. And it was; but for exactly that reason, Marchese Boccanegra had stood out in his stark black and white on the talk shows and panels.

Had once, anyway. There weren't as many of them anymore. You could even go further: There practically were none at all, and the big reason for that was the Martians. How they had ruined it for everybody!

Passing through the waiting room, Boccanegra gave the receptionist a quick four-fingered wave — it was the benediction and greeting of the Great Galactics, as he had demonstrated it for more than thirty years in the field. But she didn't seem to recognize it. No matter. Boccanegra took the carnation from his buttonhole and laid it caressingly before her (a receptionist who remembered you could make all the difference!) be-

fore pacing out to the hall, where he tapped the elevator button with the head of his cane.

Only when the door had opened and he stepped inside did he say in surprise, "Anthony! I didn't expect to see you here!"

The month was May and the day warm. But Anthony Makepeace Moore wore full regalia, fur-collared coat and black slouch hat. His expression was more startled than pleased — so was Boccanegra's own — but the two men greeted each other with the effusion of colleagues and competitors. "Marchese!" Moore cried, wringing his hand. "It's been too long, hasn't it? I suppose you've been granting interviews, too?"

Boccanegra permitted himself a wry smile. "I had intended to appear on the 'Today' show," he said, "but the appearance they wanted me to make is unfortunately out of the question. And you?"

"Oh, nothing as glamorous as the 'Today' show," smiled Moore. "I was just taping a few radio bits for the network news."

"I'll be sure to listen," Boccanegra promised, the generosity of his tone almost completely concealing the envy. The network! It had been at least two years since any network news organization had cared to have Marchese Boccanegra say anything for their listeners — and now that they'd done Moore, it would certainly be awhile before they wanted any-

one else. There was a time — a pretty long-ago time, now — when the two of them had done publicity appearances together. But that was when the alien-encounter business was booming. The fact was, now there just wasn't enough to share.

So Boccanegra was surprised when Moore looked at his aviator's watch with the three dials and said diffidently, "I suppose you're in a great hurry to get to your next engagement?"

"As a matter of fact," Boccanegra began, and then hesitated. He finished, "As a matter of fact, I'm a bit hungry. I was thinking of a sandwich somewhere — would you care to join me?"

Moore courteously bowed him out first as the elevator reached the ground floor. "I'd like that a lot, Marchese," he said warmly. "Anyplace in particular? Something ethnic, perhaps? You know how I like odd foods, and we don't get much of them in Oklahoma."

"I know just the place!" cried Boccanegra.

The very place was the Carnegie Delicatessen, half a dozen blocks from the RCA Building, and both of them had known it well.

As they walked up Seventh Avenue, people glanced at them curiously. Where Boccanegra was tall, hawklike, and aloof, Anthony Makepeace Moore was short and round. He wore bushy

white sideburns on a head that had no other hair but bushy white eyebrows. He would have been plump even in a bathing suit — so one supposed; no one had ever seen him in one — but his standard costume — winter, spring, and fall — was a bulky coat trimmed with what might well pass for ermine. It made him appear even rounder. As much as anything, Moore resembled a fat leprechaun.

What he wore in the summer was quite different, because in the summer he spent his time on the five hundred acres of his Eudorpan Astral Retreat, just outside of Enid, Oklahoma. There he wore the robes of the Eudorpan Masters. So did everyone else on the premises, though not all in the same colors. Seekers (the paying guests) wore lavender. Adepts (the staff) wore gold. Moore himself, taking a cue from the pope at Rome, never appeared in anything but spotless and freshly laundered white.

At the delicatessen, Boccanegra stepped courteously aside to let Moore go first through the revolving door. It was midafternoon, but there was a short line waiting, and the two men exchanged amused glances. "Fame," whispered Moore, and Boccanegra nodded.

"Your picture used to hang right there, next to the fan," he said.

"And yours over by the door," Moore agreed. "And now they don't even remember who we are." The cashier, overhearing, looked at them

curiously, but no identification came before their table was ready.

When Moore took off his coat, he revealed a red and white checked sport shirt underneath. "No robes today?" Boccanegra asked. The only answer he got was a frosty look. Then Moore began to pore over the menu, and his expression softened.

"That good old pastrami," he said sentimentally. "Remember the tons of it at WOR? And Long John begging us to take some home because there'd be a new batch the next night?"

"That's where we met, isn't it?" Boccanegra asked, knowing exactly that it was. The all-night Long John Nebel show had, in fact, given both of them their start in the alien-contact industry. "Remember the Mystic Barber, with that tinfoil crown he always wore?"

"And Barney and Betty Hill, and the Two Men in Black, and Will Our-sler, and — oh God, Marco," Moore said, rolling his eyes, "we didn't know when we had it good, did we? We were so young!"

"And no damned Martians to take people's minds off us," Boccanegra grumbled. "Are you ready to order?"

They passed reminiscences back and forth while they were waiting for their food to arrive — Long John and his wonderful scams, the revolving Empire State Building, the bridge off the RCA tower and all; and not only Long John but every other broadcast medium. They all seemed willing to

give airtime to talk about intelligences from other worlds — network TV and little local radio stations where you had to crouch between record turntables and hand a single microphone around the guests.

"We were so young," Moore said dreamily, pouring ketchup on his french fries.

"Remember Lonny Zamorra?" Boccanegra asked.

"And the spaceport at Giant Rock?"

"And the mutilated cows? And the car engines that got stopped? And, oh God, the Bermuda Triangle! Good Lord," said Boccanegra earnestly, "I can think of at least a dozen people that lived for years on just the Bermuda Triangle. You know what they were getting for a single *lecture*? Not counting the books and the workshops and —" He trailed off.

"And everything," said Moore somberly. They ate in silence for a moment, thinking of the days when the world had been so eager to hear what they had to say.

In those days, everyone wanted to give them a voice. Radio, television, press coverage; there was nothing anyone might say about flying saucers, or men from another planet, or mysterious revelations received in a trance, or astral voyages to other worlds that did not get an audience. A *paying* audience. Both Moore and Boccanegra had had their pick of college lecture dates and handsome hon-

oraria — enough for Boccanegra to start The Press of Ultimate Truth, Inc., to print his books; enough for Moore to buy the tract of played-out Oklahoma grazing land that became the Eudorpan Astral Retreat. Both had flourished wildly. There was no end to the customers for Boccanegra's books, more than fifteen titles in all, or to the Seekers who gladly paid a month's wages to spend a week in their lavender robes, eating lentils and raw onions out of EAR's wooden bowls (and sneaking off to the truck stop just outside the retreat for hamburgers and sinful beer), and listening worshipfully to Moore's revelations.

When the last of the pastrami and fries were gone, Moore leaned back and signaled for a coffee refill. He looked thoughtfully at Boccanegra and said, "I've been looking forward to your new book. Is it out yet?"

"It's been held up," Boccanegra explained. Actually it was a year overdue, and the new book wasn't going to appear until the bills for the last one were paid, and that didn't seem likely in the near future. "Of course," he added with as near a smile as he ever allowed himself in public, "the timing might be better later on. It's all Martians now, isn't it?"

Moore was startled. "Are you writing a book about the Martians?" he demanded.

"Me? Of course not," Boccanegra said virtuously. "Oh, there are charla-



tans who'll be doing that, no doubt. I'll bet there are a dozen of the old guard trying to change their stories around to cash in on the Martians."

"Shocking," Moore agreed with a straight face.

"Anyway, I've about decided to take a sort of sabbatical. This fad will run its course. Perhaps in a few months it'll be the right time for my book, which tells how the Great Galactics have provided us with the genetic code that explains all of the mysteries of—"

"Yeah," said Moore, staring into space. His expression did not suggest that he liked what he was seeing.

Boccanegra studied his ancient adversary. It didn't look like a very good time to bring up the sudden inspiration that had come to him in the elevator. Moore sounded depressed.

But there would never be a better time, so Boccanegra plunged in. "I've been thinking," he said.

Moore focused on him. "Yes?"

Boccanegra waved a deprecating hand. "I'll probably have some free time for a while. Perhaps the whole summer. So, I wonder — would you be interested in having me as a sort of guest lecturer at the retreat?" Moore's eyes widened under the bushy eyebrows, but he didn't speak. Boccanegra went on ingratiatingly, "Since I'm at liberty, I mean. Of course, we'd have to make some special arrangement. It wouldn't be appropriate for me to be there just as part of your

staff. Some new position? Perhaps I could wear black robes? Naturally the financial arrangements could be worked out — professional courtesy and all that," he finished with a twinkle.

The twinkle dried up. Moore's expression was stony. "No chance," he said.

Boccanegra felt the muscles in his throat begin to tighten. "No chance," he repeated, trying to keep the sudden anger out of his voice. "Well, if it's the robes—"

"It isn't the robes," said Anthony Makepeace Moore.

"No, it wouldn't be that. I suppose, since you and I have been pretty much opponents for so long—"

"Marco," said Moore sadly, "I don't give a shit about that. I can't take you on at the retreat because there isn't going to be any retreat this year. I haven't got the customers. This time I should have forty or fifty people registered — some years I've had a hundred! You know how many I've got now? Two. And one of those is only a maybe." He shook his head. "The whole thing's down the tube if something good doesn't happen. The bank's been on my back about the mortgage, and they put in that damn interstate, and even the truck stop's losing money every week—"

Boccanegra was startled. "I didn't know you owned the truck stop!"

"Well, this time next month I probably won't. They even took out the Coke machine."

Boccanegra sat in thoughtful silence for a moment. Then he laughed out loud and waved to the grouchy waitress for more coffee.

"You, too," he said. "Well, let's put our heads together and see if we can figure something out."

By the time of the fourth refill, the waitress was muttering audibly to herself.

The problem wasn't just the fickle tastes of the public. It was the Martians. There simply was no room for imaginary wonders in the public attention when the real thing was getting a few hundred miles closer to Earth every day. And the unfair part of it was that the Martians were so damned *dull*. They didn't have spiritual counseling for the troubled billions of Earth. They didn't warn of impending disasters or offer hope of salvation. They just stood there in their stalls on the spaceship *Algonquin*, swilling their scummy soup.

"I guess you've gone over all your books to see if there's anything about Martians in them?" Moore said hopefully.

Boccanegra shook his head. "I mean, yes, I looked. Nothing."

"Me, too," Moore sighed. "I'll tell you the truth, Marco. I never for one minute considered the possibility that when we were visited by creatures from outer space, they would be *stupid*. Say!" he cried, sitting up. "What if we say they aren't real? I mean,

they're like the household pets of the real Eudorpan?"

"The Great Galactics," Boccanegra corrected eagerly. "Or maybe not pets but, you know, like false clues the superior space beings put there to throw us off the trail?"

"And we can say we've had revelations about it, and — well, hell Marco," said Moore, suddenly facing reality. "Would anyone believe us?"

"Has that ever made any difference?"

"No, but really, it'd be good if we had some kind of, you know, evidence."

"Evidence," Boccanegra said thoughtfully.

"See, these Martians will actually be here in a few months, right? Next thing you know, they'll be landing, and they'll be in a zoo or something, and people can see them for themselves. They kind of talk a little bit, you know. Maybe they'd say something that could blow us right out of the water."

"They really *are* stupid, Tony."

"Yes, but Marco, if they've got some kind of writings that we don't know about, because all we've ever seen is what they sent on the TV from the spaceship—"

"But maybe they're degenerate," Boccanegra cried, "so they don't know what the stuff *really* means!"

"Well," Moore said doggedly, "there might be a real problem there, all the same. If we wait until they

land —" Then he shook his head. "Scratch that. We can't wait that long; at least I can't. I could stall the creditors for maybe a month or two, but the spaceship isn't going to land till nearly Christmas."

"And this is only June." Boccanegra puzzled for a moment; there had been, he was almost sure, something good they had come quite close to. But what was it?

"How about," said Moore, "if we found some *other* Martians?"

Boccanegra frowned. "Besides the ones they've found, you mean? Somewhere else on Mars?"

"Not necessarily on Mars. But the same sort of creatures, maybe on Venus, maybe on the Moon — we say they live in caves, see? So nobody's seen them; that's what they do on Mars, right? There could even have been some long ago on — what's its name, that moon of Jupiter that's always having volcanic eruptions—only the volcanoes killed them off."

"Um," said Boccanegra. "Yeah, maybe." He was scowling in concentration, because that faint ringing of cash registers was still in his ears, only he couldn't quite tell where it came from. "I don't see where we get any kind of evidence that way, though," he pointed out. "I'd like it if we had something right here on Earth about that."

"O.K., Antarctica! There's a colony of them on Antarctica; or at least there used to be, but they died of

cold after the continents migrated."

"There are people all over Antarctica, Tony. Russians and Americans and everybody."

"Well, at the bottom of the sea?"

"They've got those robot submarines going down there all the time."

"Sure," Moore said, improvising, "but those are all U.S. Navy or something, aren't they? The subs have seen all the proof in the world, but the government's covering up."

"That's good," Boccanegra said thoughtfully. "Let's see if I've got the picture. There were beings like these Martians all over the Solar System once. Of course, they're not really 'Martians.' It's just that the first live specimens that turned up were on Mars, all right? They've been on Earth, too, ever since the time the Great Galactics came — the people from Planet Theta, too," he added quickly. "And all these years they've been hiding down there, exerting an influence on what has happened to the human race. It hasn't all been good: wars, depressions—"

"Crazy fads," Moore put in.

"Right! All the things that have gone wrong, it's because these Martians have been willing it; they've degenerated and become evil. We don't call them Martians, of course. We call them something like Emissaries, or Guardians, or — what's a bad kind of guardian?"

"Dead Souls," said Moore triumphantly.

"Sure, they're Dead Souls. Sounds kind of Russian, but that's not had either. And they've been in Antarctica under the ice and — Aw, no," he said, disappointed. "It won't work. We can't get to Antarctica."

"So?"

"So how do we get evidence that there really are Dead Souls there?"

"I don't really see why you keep harping on evidence," Moore said irritably.

"I don't mean evidence like finding a real, live Dead Soul kind of Martian," Boccanegra explained. "You know. We need some sort of message. Mystic drawings. Carvings. Something like the Cuzco lines, or the rune stone. Of course," he explained, "they wouldn't be in any Earthly language. We work out translations. *Partial* translations, because we don't give the whole thing at once; we keep translating new sections as we go along."

"We get the key from Planet Theta in a trance," Moore said helpfully.

"Or astral projection," Boccanegra nodded, "from the Great Galactics." He thought for a moment, and then said wistfully, "But it would be better if we had something to take photographs of. I always put photographs in my books; they really make a difference, Tony."

"Maybe we could crack open some rocks, like Richard Shaver? And find mystic drawings in the markings?"

"I don't like to repeat what any-

body else has done," Boccanegra said virtuously. "And I don't know where Shaver got the rocks, either. Maybe in a cave, or—"

He stopped in mid-sentence, the ringing of the cash bells now loud and clear. They stared at each other.

"A cave," Moore whispered.

"Not under the ocean. Under the ground! Tony! Are there any caves under the retreat?"

"Not a one," Moore said regretfully. "I didn't think of that when I bought the tract. But listen, there are millions of caves all over. All we have to do is find one big one with a lot of passages no one ever goes into—"

"There are lots right along the Mississippi River," Boccanegra chimed in. "There's even the Mammoth Cave, or Carlsbad — why, there are some in Pennsylvania that haven't even been explored much."

"And then maybe I can say I've seen the carvings while I was in astral projection—"

"And then I can actually go there and discover them and take pictures!" Boccanegra finished triumphantly. "I wouldn't say where they came from at first—"

"—until we got a chance to put the drawings there—"

"—and nobody would argue, because everybody knows you and I have never worked together—"

"—and they'd be kind of like Shaver's Deros—"

"—only not deranged robots;

they'll look like the Martians, because they're the same Dead Souls, and they mess everything up for humanity because they're evil—"

"And we'll split the money!" Moore cried. "You do your books. I'll do the retreats. Maybe along about Labor Day, you and I can have a public reconciliation, submerging our old differences because now we've discovered this ultimate reality not even we suspected before—"

"—and I can come to the retreats—"

"And, sure, you can have black robes," Moore said generously. "Marco, it's doable! The good old days are coming back, for sure!"

The two men smiled at each other, their minds racing. Then Moore said, "What about the 'Today' show? That'd be a great place to start, if you can get in?"

Boccanegra pursed his lips. Thank heaven he'd sweetened the receptionist; she'd let him in, probably, and then he could just walk in on the booking woman; then it would just be a matter of how fast he could talk. "At least fifty-fifty," he estimated, "if I get back to NBC before the offices close."

"And I'll go right down to the library and start looking up caves," Moore said. "And we don't want to be seen too much together, so what do you say we just get together for a minute later on tonight, say about seven?"

"Lobby of the Grand Hyatt," Boccanegra agreed. He clapped his hands imperiously at the waitress, sulking by the kitchen door. She came over and dropped the check in front of him.

"I'll get the tip," Moore offered, pulling out a handful of silver. Boccanegra, back in character, merely inclined his head in silent agreement, although inside he was marking up the mental ledger: \$9.50 for the pastrami sandwiches, and only five quarters for the tip; next time they would eat in a better place and *he* would take care of the tip. As he waited for the cashier to fill out the slip on the one remaining valid credit card, Boccanegra said suddenly, "My cane!" He hurried back to the table before the waitress got there and picked up two of the quarters. Then he rejoined Anthony Makepeace Moore at the door, and the two prophets went out into the world they were about to conquer.



Installment 19: *In Which We Long For The Stillness Of The Lake, The Smooth Swell Of The Sea*

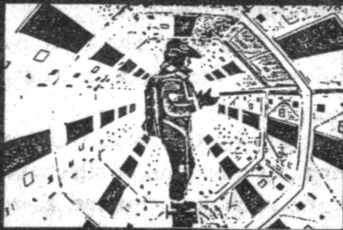
At one of those college literary bashes where The Celebrated Visiting Author sits alone on the stage and academics with clipboards pelt him or her with "insightful" questions, I was recently hit with the poser, "What is your definition of maturity?"

I thought about that for a moment before answering.

And in that moment, here is the anecdote that flashed through my head, that I did not impart to the gathered sages:

Most of you know by now that my friend Mike Hodel, host for more than fifteen years of the *Hour 25* radio show on KPFK-FM in Los Angeles, died of brain cancer on Tuesday, May 6th. Because he learned of his terminal state in February, and because the continuation of the program was a matter of concern to him, Mike came to visit and we talked about the darkness soon to come; and Mike asked me to host the show for him when he was gone. Because I loved him, and because his show has been so important to writers and readers of the genre for so long, I agreed to take over *Hour 25*.

But the foreknowledge of Mike's imminent leavetaking, added to the weight of the deaths of so many close friends these last few months, sent me into a tailspin. My thoughts grew



# HARLAN ELLISON'S Watching

wearier and grimmer by the day. Until the anguish and the pressure began to produce a sharp pain behind my left eye.

As I am one of those blessed individuals who almost *never* get headaches, this sharp needlepoint of agony behind my left eye came to obsess me. I knew very well, in my right mind, that I did not share Mike's illness; but every time the pain returned, I tumbled into the abyss of irrationality and thought, "I've got brain cancer. There's a gray pudding on the grow back there behind my eye." It was crazy; and when I saw Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters* in the middle of March, and Woody went through *exactly* the same hypochondriacal situation, I laughed at myself. But I could not shake the terrible thought, and finally I made an appointment with John Romm, who has been my doctor for decades, and I went to find out if I was more irrational than usual.

John examined me, put the light up to the eye and looked in, and reported back that there didn't seem to be anything in there pressing against the optic nerve. "Shouldn't I get a brain scan?" I said. "Well, if you're thinking about something like that, there's better state of the art than a CAT scan. It's called an MRI and it costs about a grand."

"MRI?"

"Magnetic Resonance Imaging. About a grand. But if you can't get

this lunacy out of your mind, spend the money and put yourself at ease."

"I'll think about it."

So I thought about it. For several weeks. Went to see Mike in Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, couldn't rid myself of the horror, and finally went in for the MRI. The next day, John called to report the findings on the images. "You're fine," he said. "No problems in there at all."

I felt the edge of the desk I had been gripping for the first instant since I'd picked up his call, and realized how mad I'd been driven by Mike's situation. The pain behind my eye vanished instantly.

Then I heard John chuckling. "What's so goddam funny?" I demanded, feeling more the fool than ever.

"Well, it's just something the technician who sent these over said," John replied, trying to keep a straight tone.

"Yeah? And what was that?"

"Uh, well . . . he asked me, 'Are you *sure* this guy is almost fifty-two years old?' And I said, yes, I was certain; that I'd known you for years and that I knew you'd be fifty-two in May, and he said, 'This is remarkable for a guy his age. The actual brain matter looks like that of a six-year-old boy.' " And John broke up again. When he had it under control he said, "I always suspected you had the brain of a six-year-old."

That was what I thought in the

moment before answering the academics. Because it was the anecdote that informed what I've always considered to be a pretty workable definition of maturity. And I said to the questioner, "I take to mean, when you say *maturity*, that you're asking what I think an adult is. And my answer is that being grown-up means having achieved in adult terms what you dreamed of being as a child. In other words, you'd be mature, and an adult grown-up, if — say — when you were a kid you wanted to be a cowboy and now you owned a cattle ranch. Or if you wanted to fly like Superman when you were a kid, if you were now an airline pilot."

And I added this quotation from Rimbaud: "Genius is the recovery of childhood at will."

These thoughts, as random as most with which I open this column every time, tie in with observations about childish and adult visions of what to make as a motion picture in an era when the studios check the growth-rings of writers and directors before they commit to a project.

As rare as it has been in the history of motion picture writing for talent of a high order to emerge—Richard Brooks, James Goldman, Richard L. Breen, Paddy Chayefsky, Herman Mankiewicz, Ring Lardner, Jr. and the Epstein brothers come immediately to mind, though the list is a lot longer than you'd care to have me reproduce here and, sad sad sad,

you wouldn't recognize the names of those who dreamed the dreams and put the words into the mouths of Bogart and Lancaster and Bergman and McQueen — as rare as it's been till now, the situation today is fuckin' bloody tragic. We operate in The Age of the Know-Nothing Tots.

Kids raised not on literature, or even on films, but on television reruns, are being hired every minute to write and produce films that have the social import and artistic longevity of zweiback.

(Here are some grim statistics. The current membership of the Writers Guild of America, West is 6181. Of that number only 51% is currently employed. That's 3152 men and women. But of *that* percentage, while 61% of WGAw members under forty years of age are working, only 43% *over* forty have a job. Don't ask what it's like for directors.)

The deals being made at Cannon, at Fox, at Paramount and Universal, are deals for projects brought to executives by second-rate and derivative talents. Deals brought to men and women whose backgrounds are seldom in filmmaking, whose expertise and store of literary precedents is at best meager. (This is a series of generalizations. Of *course* not every one who sells a script, or more usually a script *idea*, is a superannuated surfer. There are Larry Kasdans and Vickie Patiks and Tom Benedeks who have as much *élan* as Shelagh Delany



or Harold Ramis or Horton Foote at the top of their form. But the generalization speaks unquaveringly to the reality of the industry practice today. The young and dumb sell to the only slightly less young and much dumber.)

These deals being made, and the films often made as a result of the deals, are films that cannot be viewed or critiqued by standards that have always obtained for literature, movies or even television segments.

Consider: we learn from the trade papers that filmgoing dropped another 15% last year. We learn that more and more of the audience that used to go out to, say, a movie a week, now stays home and watches videocassettes. The weekly opening of movies convinces us that overwhelmingly the theater-viewing audience is made up of teenagers. In the week that I write this column, here is what dominates the screens of Los Angeles, not much different from the screens where you live:

Molly Ringwald in *Pretty in Pink*; Judd Nelson in *Blue City*; Sean Penn in *At Close Range*; *Band of the Hand*; Nicolas Cage in *The Boy in Blue*; Ally Sheedy in *Short Circuit*; *Dangerously Close*; *Fire with Fire*; *Echo Park*; *Free Ride*; *Girls Just Want to Have Fun*; *Lucas* and *Top Gun* with Tom Cruise.

These are all films either *about* teenagers, or *starring* teenagers (though most of them are now in their twenties . . . the Brat Pack be-

gins to creak and suffer morning arthritis). Most of them belabor the rite of passage, the dawn of sexuality, the pair-bonding of prep school twits, or the confusion of mid-life crisis occurring at age eighteen.

And one realizes, with a shock, that the traditional basics for reviewing films is inapplicable these days. One cannot, at peril of being hincty and irrelevant, evaluate a film on the merits of screenwriting, editing, direction or even design. None of these staples seem to matter to the merchandisers of modern films. Apart from splashy special effects (which is a criterion that has begun to pall for even the most unjudgmental Kallikak), the sole criterion of a movie's worth — looney! lunatic! loopy! — is if the soundtrack can be melded to 2-second snippets of the action sequences to form a music video for MTV, producing, of course, a gold album.

It doesn't matter if the film is a medieval fantasy (*Ladyhawke*), a contemporary aerobatics adventure (*Top Gun*), a western (*Silverado*), an Eddie Murphy-clone cop rampage (*Running Scared*), or retold fairy tales (*Legend*, *Company of Wolves*). All that counts is that a *sound* is produced that can function in the secondary markets for appeal only to those who cannot listen to music in anything under 200 decibels. That the music doesn't fit, that the music jars, that the music distracts and

blunts the mood of scene after scene, seems not to enter into consideration by those responsible for the film's artistic gestalt.

It is adolescent adults playing 3-card monte with the captive kiddie audience, or actual tots saying fuck you to the rest of the world, both younger and older.

This cynical pandering to the sophomoric, unformed and utterly indiscriminating hungers of a juvenile audience disenfranchises the rest of us, both younger and older than the demographic wedge that buys rock music . . . or worse, that even smaller wedge that doesn't buy but merely derives its calorie-poor musical diet from *watching television*!

Take **SHORT CIRCUIT** (Tri-Star) and **LEGEND** (Universal) as specimens under the microscope.

*Short Circuit* is nothing more than a sappy replay of *E.T.* with a cuddly, anthropomorphized runaway robot replacing a cuddly etcetera etcetera alien. It is last year's *D.A.R.Y.L.* Martinized and reworn. (Only difference is that Barrett Oliver as the robot in *D.A.R.Y.L.* had his gears and cogs and chips camouflaged, while No. 5 in *Short Circuit* has metal in view.) Both films paint authority as not merely inept and evil-with-a-Three-Stooges silliness, but as implacably stupid and brutish.

Granted, *Short Circuit* posits the philosophical position that violence and killing are not nice things to do,

which is a salutary message in this era of *Cobra* and *Rambo*; nonetheless it is a film that panders to the youth audience by giving them two of the three staples of *all* these teen-slanted films.

What are the three?

1) Bare tits. (Absent from this movie, presumably because Ally Sheedy, the omnipresent Ally Sheedy, is such a box office draw that she doesn't have to bare her bosom.)

2) Disdain for authority.

3) Casual destruction of personal and public property.

No. 5 is just a kid, after all. It may be a kid with molybdenum paws, that runs on trunnions instead of sneakers, but it's just a kid. And, like James Dean, it is having a hard time learning who is it. It suffers existential angst in trying to reconcile the creative abilities of humans with the species's need to slaughter. It is the same, tired rebel without a cause yarn. It invests the young with a nobility that is unpossessed, presumably, by anyone over the age of twenty-one.

*Short Circuit* did big ticket business, but no amount of giving-the-benefit for its anti-killing aspect can disguise the fact that this plate of spinach is a manipulative, sappy truckling to teen hungers and fantasies. And having Steve Guttenberg standing around like something carved from Silly Putty don't help beat the bulldog, if you catch my drift.

Yet *Short Circuit* soared. I suggest

this phenomenal turn of events can be linked to the promotion of the film via music videos and its totemization of adolescent rebellion fantasies. It sure as hell couldn't have been on the basis of freshness of material or superlative acting.

It is a kiddie film, made by adults pretending to have the souls of the pure and innocent. Porky, duded up like Peter Pan.

A sidebar thought, probably deeper than we have space here to explore: is film rendering our impression of the mutable world meaningless?

For more than sixty years we have received a good proportion of our understanding of the world around us from movies. Film was seldom at the cutting edge of the culture in portraying trends, but as soon as a trend became clear, movies were in there, commenting on it, well or badly. *On the Waterfront* may have come to the subject of labor corruption late in the game, but when it came, it made its position known. America took notice. *Saturday Night Fever* may look cornball today, only nine years later, with its stacked-heel disco boots and its Nik-Nik shirts, but it drove America into a spin when the Bee Gees and Travolta made their statement about the social set that lived and foamed in disco palaces. (And it was only about five years into the trend before it got the wind up; pretty good for an essentially con-

servative industry.)

But is this ability to mirror the world still operating in the mainstream of motion pictures?

I think not. The numbers are skewed, the facts distorted, the picture out of focus. One of those Polaroid shots in which everything comes out roast beef red. Such films as *Short Circuit* — the sf version of a typical teen rebellion flick — send us a view of the world that resembles “The Lord of the Flies” more than it does reality. Kids run everything in these movies. Either kids grown a little older, like Guttenberg and Sheedy and Cage and Estavez and Moore, or kids in their native habitat, like Nelson and Macchio.

It was bad enough when movies beat us about the blades to accept obscurantism and illogic like Amityville as the secret formula to understand Life, but the current flood of discarded immaturity that pretends to be How It Is *looks* real, no matter how twisted and bent. And this, I submit, is hardly the meal we need to enrich us.

They are films that reject maturity, even in the loose terms I suggested at the outset of this essay.

Films made that play to childish (not childlike) ideas of what the Eternal Verities might be.

Films that sell smash-cut music videos to an audience with only dawning responsibility toward itself and its Times, an audience with too much

money burning a hole in its pocket, and the blood-level belief that its youth is the noblest state to which a person can aspire.

Films that sell, with obvious and hidden tropes, in every frame, the bill of goods that anyone not capable of appearing on Soul Train is beyond consideration, so what the hell does it matter if we bust up their property and give 'em the finger?

When this pretense of innocence, as in *Short Circuit*, is swallowed whole by presumed adults, we have a situation where filmmakers who should know better gull themselves into selling that hype of Youth Eternal with no understanding of how they corrupt not only their talent, but the very audience they pretend to serve.

Such is the case with *Legend*, which I'll deal with at full length next time. Suffice to say, for now, that this epic brought forth by Ridley Scott and a battalion of equally talented creators, panders as shamefully as *Top Gun* or *Porky's* to teenage fantasies of Good and Evil, Rebellion and Authority, Youth and Age. And does it with the breakneck pace of an MTV potboiler, so loud and so demented

in its headlong flight, that we emerge from the screening room gasping for breath, praying for a moment of surcease.

There is no room to breathe in *Legend*, even as there is no room to breathe in *Beverly Hills Cop* or *Top Gun*. We are not permitted a moment's respite to think what all this kiddie fascination with faeries and unicorns and demons and goblins is all in aid of.

Do not mistake my meaning. *Legend* is an astonishing film in many ways. The eyes will behold things they have never seen, have only conjured in dreams. And that is wonderful, because it's what movies are *supposed* to do for us.

But *Legend* becomes, in its final American version, a telling example of studio interference, of Art twisted to serve the ends of Commerce Unchecked, of a creative intellect operating without maturity. I'll talk about it next time.

Because *Legend* is something really strange: a fifty-two year old man with the brain of a six-year-old. Something really strange like that.



*Lucius Shepard ("A Spanish Lesson" December 1985; "The Jaguar Hunger" May 1985) returns with another of his distinctive tales; he describes this one as "my idea of a story told by a future storyteller about his distant past, which is our distant future . . .*

# The Arcevoalo

BY  
LUCIUS SHEPARD

**O**ne morning nearly five hundred years after the September War, whose effects had transformed the Amazon into a region of supernal mystery, a young man with olive skin and delicate features and short black hair awoke to find himself lying amid a bed of ferns not far from the ruined city of Manaus. It seemed to him that some great darkness had just been lifted away, but he could recall nothing more concrete of his past, neither his name nor those of his parents or place of birth. Indeed, he was so lacking in human referents that he remained untroubled by this state of affairs and gazed calmly around at the high green canopy and the dust-hung shafts of sun and the tapestry of golden radiance and shadow overlying the jungle floor. Everywhere he turned he saw marvelous creatures: butterflies with translucent

wings; birds with hinged, needle-thin beaks; snakes with faceted eyes that glowed more brightly than live coals. Yet the object that commanded his attention was a common orchid, its bloom a dusky lavender, that depended from the lowermost branch of a guanacaste tree. The sight mesmerized him, and intuitions about the orchid flowed into his thoughts: how soft its petals were, how subtle its fragrance, and, lastly, that it was not what it appeared to be. At that moment, as if realizing that he had penetrated its disguise, the bloom flew apart, revealing itself to have been composed of glittering insects, all of which now whirled off toward the canopy, shifting in color like particles of an exploded rainbow; and the young man understood — a further intuition — that he, too, was not what he appeared.

Puzzled, and somewhat afraid, he glanced down at the ferns and saw scattered among them pieces of a fibrous black husk. Upon examining them, he discovered that the insides of the pieces were figured by smooth indentations that conformed exactly to the shapes of his face and limbs. There could be no doubt that prior to his awakening, he had been enclosed within the husk like a seed in its casing. His anxiety increased when—on setting down one of the pieces—his fingers brushed the clay beneath the ferns and he saw before his mind's eye the pitching deck of a vast wooden ship, with wild seas bursting over the railings. Men wearing steel helmets and carrying pikes were huddled in the bow, and standing in the door that led to the gun decks (how had he known that?) was a gray-haired man who beckoned to him. To him? No, to someone he had partly been. João Merín Nascimento. That name—like his vision of the ship—surfaced in his thoughts following contact with the clay. And with the name came a thousand fragments of memory, sufficient to make the young man realize that Nascimento, a Portuguese soldier of centuries past, lay buried beneath the spot where he was sitting, and that he was in essence the reincarnation of the old soldier: for just as the toxins and radiations of the September War had transformed the jungle, so the changed jungle had worked a process of alchemy on those

ancient bones and produced a new creature, human to a degree, yet—to a greater degree—quite inhuman. Understanding this eased the young man's anxiety, because he now knew that he was safe in the dominion of the jungle, whose creature he truly was. But he understood, too, that his manlike form embodied a cunning purpose, and in hopes of discerning that purpose, he set out to explore the jungle, walking along a trail that led (though he was not aware of it) to the ruins of Manaus.

Nine days he walked, and during those days he learned much about the jungle's character and—consequently—about his own. From a creature with a dozen bodies, each identical, yet only one of which contained its vital spark, he learned an ultimate caution; from the *malgatón*, a fierce jaguarlike beast whose strange eyes could make a man dream of pleasure while he died, he learned the need for circumspection in the cause of violence; from the deadly *jicaparee* vine with its exquisite flowers, he learned the importance of setting a lure and gained an appreciation of the feral principles underlying all beauty.

From each of these creatures and more, he learned that no living thing is without its parasites and symbiotes, and that in the moment they are born their death is also born. But not until he came in sight of the ruined city, when he saw its crumbling, vine-

draped towers tilting above the canopy like grotesque vegetable chessmen whose board was in process of being overthrown, not until then did he at last fathom his purpose: that he was to be the jungle's weapon against mankind, its mortal enemy who time and again had sought to destroy it.

The young man could not conceive how — fangless and clawless — he would prove a threat to an enemy with weapons that had poisoned a world. Perplexed, hoping some further illumination would strike him, he took to wandering the city streets, over cracked flagstones between which he could see the tunnels of guerilla ants, past ornate wrought-iron streetlamps in whose fractured globes white phosphorescent spiders the size of skull crabs had spun their webs (by night their soft glow conveyed a semblance of the city's fabulous heyday into this, its rotting decline), and through the cavernous mansions of the wealthy dead. Everywhere he wandered he encountered danger, for Manaus had been heavily dusted during the September War and thus was home to the most perverse of the jungle's mutations: flying lizards that spit streams of venom; albino peacocks whose shrill cries could make a man bleed from the ears; the sortilene, a mysterious creature never glimpsed by human eyes, known only by the horrid malignancies that sprouted from the flesh of its victims; herds of peccaries, super-

ficially unchanged but possessing vocal chords that could duplicate the cries of despairing women. At night an enormous shadow obscured the stars, testifying to an even more dire presence. Yet none of these creatures troubled the young man — they seemed to know him for an ally. And, indeed, often as he explored the gloomy interiors of the ruined houses, he would see hundreds of eyes gazing at him, slit pupils and round, showing all colors like a spectrum of stars ranging the dusky green shade, and then he would have the idea that they were watching over him.

At length he entered the lobby of a hotel that — judging by the sumptuous rags of its drapes, the silver-cloth stripe visible in the moss-furred wallpaper, the immensity of the reception desk — must once have been a palace among hotels. Thousands of slitherings stilled when he entered. The dark green shadows seemed the visual expression of a cloying mustiness, one redolent of a thousand insignificant deaths. His footsteps shaking loose falls of plaster dust, he walked along the main hallway, past elevator shafts choked with vines and epiphytes, and came eventually to a foyer whose roof was holed in such a fashion that sharply defined sunbeams hung down from it, dappling the scummy surface of an ornamental pond with coins of golden light. There, sitting naked and cross-legged on a large lily pad — the sort that

once hampered navigation on the Río Negro due to the toughness of its fiber — was an old Indian man, so wizened that he appeared to be a homunculus. His eyes were closed, his white hair filthy and matted, and his coppery skin bore a greenish tinge (whether this was natural coloration or a product of the shadows, the young man could not determine). The young man expected intuitions about the Indian to flow into his thoughts; but when this did not occur, he realized that though the Indians, too, had been changed by the September War, though they were partially the jungle's creatures, they were still men, and the jungle had no knowledge of men other than that it derived from the bones of the dead. How then, he wondered, could he defeat an enemy about whom he was ignorant? He stretched out a hand to the Indian, thinking a touch might transmit some bit of information. But the Indian's eyes blinked open, and with a furious splashing he paddled the lily pad beyond the young man's reach. "The arcevoalo must be cautious with his touch," he said in a creaky voice that seemed to stir the atoms of the dust within the sunbeams. Haven't you learned that?"

Though the young man — the arcevoalo — had not heard his name before, he recognized it immediately. With its Latinate echoes of wings and arcs, it spoke to him of the life he would lead, how he would soar brief-

ly through the world of men and then return to give his knowledge of them to the jungle. Knowing his name opened him to his full strength — he felt it flooding him like a golden heat — and served to align his character more precisely with that of the jungle. He stared down at the Indian, who now struck him as being wholly alien, and asked how *he* had known the name.

"This truth I have eaten has told it to me," said the Indian, holding up a pouch containing a quantity of white powder. Grains of it adhered to his fingers. "I was called here to speak the truth to someone . . . doubtless to you. But now I must leave." He slipped off the lily pad and waded toward the edge of the pond.

Moving so quickly that he caused the merest flutter of shadow upon the surface of the water, the arcevoalo leaped to the far side of the pond, blocking the Indian's path. "What is this 'truth?'" he asked. "And who called you here?"

"The powder derives from the asuero flower," said the Indian. "A plant fertilized with the blood of honest men. As to who called me, if I had known that I might not have come." He made as if to haul himself from the pond, but the arcevoalo stayed him.

"How must I go about conquering my enemy?" he asked.

"To do battle one must first understand the foe."



"Then I will keep you with me and learn your ways," countered the arcevoalo.

The Indian hissed impatiently. "I am as different from those you must understand as you are from me. You must go to the city of Sangué do Lume. It is a new city, inhabited by Brazilians who fled the September War. Until recently they dwelled in metal worlds that circle the darkness behind the sky. Now they have returned to claim their ancient holdings, to reap the fruits of the jungle and to kill its animals for profit. It is they with whom you will contend."

"How will I contend? I have no weapons."

"You have speed and strength," said the Indian. "But your greatest weapon is a mere touch."

He instructed the arcevoalo to press the pads of his fingers hard, and when he did droplets of clear fluid welled from beneath the nails.

"A single drop will enslave any man's heart for a time," said the Indian. "But you must use this power sparingly, for your body can produce the fluid only in a limited quantity."

He flicked his eyes nervously from side to side, obviously afraid, eager to be gone. The arcevoalo continued to ask questions, but the effects of the "truth" drug were wearing off, and the Indian began to whine and to lie, saying that his cousin, whom he had not seen since the Year of Fabulous Sorrows, was coming to visit and he

would be remiss if he were not home to greet him. With a wave of his hand, the arcevoalo dismissed him, and the Indian went scuttling away toward the lobby.

For a long time the arcevoalo stood beside the pond, thinking about what the Indian had said, watching the sunlight fade; in its stead a gray-green dusk filtered down from the holes in the roof. Soon he felt himself dimming, his thoughts growing slow, his blood sluggish, his muscles draining of strength: it was as if the dusk were also taking place inside his soul and body, and a gray-green fluid seeping into him and making him terribly weak and vague, incapable of movement. He saw that from every crack and cranny, jeweled eyes and scaly snouts and tendriled mouths were peering and thrusting and gaping. And in this manifold scrutiny, he sensed the infinitude of lives for whom he was to be the standard-bearer: those creatures in the ruined foyer were but the innermost ring of an audience focused upon him from every corner of the jungle. He apprehended them singly and as one, and from the combined intelligence of their regard he understood that dusk for him was an hour during which he must be solitary, both to hide from men the weakness brought on by the transition from light to dark, and to commune with the source of his imperatives. Dusk thickened to night, shafts of silvery moonlight shone down to re-

place those of the sun, which now burned over Africa, and with the darkness a new moon of power rose inside the arcevoalo, a silver strength equal yet distinct from the golden strength he possessed by day, geared more to elusiveness than to acts of domination. Freed of his intangible bonds, he walked from the hotel and set forth to find Sangue do Lume.

**D**uring the twenty-seven days it took the arcevoalo to reach Sangue do Lume — which means “Blood of Light” in Portuguese, which is the language of sanguinary pleasures and heartbreak — he tested himself against the jungle. He outran the malgatón, outclimbed the tarzanal, and successfully spied upon the mysterious sortilene. He tested himself joyfully, and perhaps he never came to be happier than he was in those days, living in a harmony of green light and birds by day, and by night gazing into the ruby eyes of a malgatón, into those curious pupils that flickered and changed shape and brought the comfort of dreams. One evening he scaled a peak, hoping to lure down the huge shadow that each night obscured the stars, and when it flew near he saw that it was almost literally a shadow, being millimeters thick and having neither eyes nor mouth nor any feature that he could discern. There was something familiar about it, and he sensed that it was interested

in him, that it — like him — was the sole member of its species. But otherwise it remained a puzzle: a rippling field of opaque darkness as incomprehensible as a flat black thought.

Sangue do Lume lay in a hilly valley between three mountains and was modeled after the old colonial towns, with cobbled streets and white stucco houses that had ironwork balconies and tiled roofs and gardens in their courtyards. Surrounding it — also after the style of the old colonial towns — was a slum where lived the laborers who had built the city. And surrounding the slum was a high wall of gray metal from which energy weapons were aimed at the jungle (no such weapons, however, were permitted within the wall). Despite the aesthetic incompatibility of its defenses, the city was beautiful, beautiful even to the eyes of the arcevoalo as he studied it from afar. He could not understand why it seemed so, being the home of his enemy; but he was later to learn that the walls of the houses contained machines that refined the images of the real, causing the visual aspect of every object to tend toward the ideal. Thus it was that the precise indigo shadows were in actuality blurred and dead-black; thus it was that women who went beyond the walls veiled themselves to prevent their husbands from taking note of their coarsened appearance; thus it was that the flies and

rats and other pests of *Sangue do Lume* possessed a certain eye-catching appeal.

Each morning dozens of ships shaped like flat arrowpoints would lift from the city and fly off across the jungle; each afternoon they would return, their holds filled with dead plants and bloody carcasses, which would be unloaded into slots in the metal wall, presumably for testing. Seeing this, the *arcevoalo* grew enraged. Still, he bided his time and studied the city's ways, and it was not until a week after his arrival that he finally went down to the gate. The gatekeepers were amazed to see a naked man walk out of the jungle and were at first suspicious; but he told them a convincing tale of childhood abandonment (a childhood of which, he said, he could recall only his name — João Merín Nascimento), of endless wandering and narrow escapes, and soon the gatekeepers, their eyes moist with pity, admitted him and brought him before the governor, *Caudez do Tuscanduva*: a burly, middle-aged man with fierce black eyes and a piratical black beard and skin the color of sandalwood. The audience was brief, for the governor was a busy and a practical man, and when he discovered the *arcevoalo*'s knowledge of the jungle, he assigned him to work on the flying ships and gave orders that every measure should be taken to ensure his comfort.

Such was the *arcevoalo*'s novelty

that all the best families clamored to provide him with food and shelter, and thus it was deemed strange that *Caudez do Tuscanduva* chose to quarter him in the *Valverde* house. The *Valverdes* were involved in a long-standing blood feud with the governor, one initiated years before upon the worlds behind the sky. The governor had been constrained by his vows of office from settling the matter violently, and it was assumed that this conferring of an honored guest must be his way of making peace. But the *Valverdes* themselves were not wholly persuaded by the idea, and therefore — with the exception of *Orlando*, the eldest son — they maintained an aloof stance toward the *arcevoalo*. *Orlando* piloted one of the ships that plundered the jungle, and it was to his ship that the *arcevoalo* had been assigned. He realized that by assisting in this work he would better understand his enemy, and so he did the work well, using his knowledge to track down the *malgatón* and the *sortilene* and creatures even more elusive. Yet it dismayed him, nonetheless. And what most dismayed him was the fact that as the weeks went by, he began to derive a human satisfaction from a job well done and to cherish his growing friendship with *Orlando*, who, by virtue of his delicate features and olive skin, might have been the *arcevoalo*'s close relation.

*Orlando* was typical of the citizenry in his attitude of divine right

concerning the land, in his arrogance toward the poor ("They are eternal," he once said. "You'll sooner find a cure for death than for poverty."), and in his single-minded pursuit of pleasure; yet there was about him a courage and soulfulness that gained the arcevoalo's respect. On most nights he and Orlando would dress in black trousers and blousy silk shirts, and would join similarly dressed young men by the fountain in the main square. There they would practice at dueling with the knife and the cintral (a jungle weed with sharp-edged tendrils and a rudimentary nervous system that could be employed as a living cat-o'-nine-tails), while the young women would promenade around them and cast shy glances at their favorites. The arcevoalo pretended clumsiness with the weapons, not wanting to display his speed and strength, and he was therefore often the subject of ridicule. This was just as well, for occasionally these play-duels would escalate, and then — since even death was beautiful in *Sangue do Lume*— blood would eel across the cobblestones, assuming lovely serpentine forms, and the palms ringing the square would rustle their fronds, and sad music would issue from the fountain, mingling with the splash of the waters.

Many of these duels stemmed from disputes over the affections of the governor's daughter, Sylvana, the sole child of his dead wife, his pride and joy. The bond between father and

daughter was of such intimacy, it was said that should one's heart stop, the other would not long survive. Sylvana was pale, slim, blonde, and angelic of countenance, but was afflicted by a brittleness of expression that bespoke coldness and insensitivity. Observing this, the arcevoalo was led to ask Orlando why the young men would risk themselves for so heartless a prize. Orlando laughed and said, "How can you understand when you have no experience of women?" And he invited the arcevoalo to gain this experience by coming with him to the Favelin, which was the name of the slum surrounding the city.

The next night, Orlando and the arcevoalo entered the cluttered, smelly streets of the Favelin. The hovels there were made of rotting boards, pitched like wreckage at every angle, and were populated by a malnourished, shrunken folk who looked to be of a different species from Orlando. Twists of oily smoke fumed from the chimneys; feathered lizards slept in the dirt next to grimy children; hags in black shawls sacrificed pigs beneath glass bells full of luminescent fungus and scrawled bloody words in the dust to cure the sick. How ugly all this might have been beyond the range of the city's machines, the arcevoalo could not conceive. They came to a street whereon the doors were hung with red curtains, and Orlando ushered him through one of these and into a room furnished with a pallet and a

chair. Mounted on the wall was the holograph of a bearded man who—though the cross to which he was nailed had burst into emerald flames—had maintained a beatific expression. The flames shed a ghastly light over a skinny girl lying on a pallet. She was hollow-cheeked, with large, empty-looking eyes and jaundiced skin and ragged dark hair. Orlando whispered to her, gave her a coin, and—grinning as he prepared to leave—said, “Her name is Ana.”

Without altering her glum expression, Ana stood and removed her shift. Her breasts had the convexity of upturned saucers, her ribs showed, and her genitals were almost hairless. Nevertheless, the arcevoalo became aroused, and when he sank down onto the pallet and entered her, he felt a rush of dominance and joy that roared through him like a whirlwind. He clutched at Ana’s hips with all his strength, building toward completion. And staring into her hopeless eyes, he sensed the profound alienness of women, their mystical endurance, the eerie valences of their moods, and how even their common thoughts turn hidden corners into bizarre mental worlds. Knowing his dominance over this peculiar segment of humanity acted to heighten his desire, and with a hoarse cry he fell spent beside Ana and into a deep sleep.

He awoke to find her gazing at him with a look of such rapt contemplation that when she turned her eyes

away, the image of his face remained reflected in her pupils. Timorously, shyly, she asked if he planned to return to the Favelin, to her. He recalled then the force with which he had clutched her, and he inspected the tips of his fingers. Droplets glistened beneath the nails, and there were damp bruises on Ana’s hips. He realized that his touch, his secret chemistry, had manifested as love, an emotion whose power he apprehended but whose nature he did not understand.

“Will you return?” she asked again.

“Yes,” he said, feeling pity for her. “Tomorrow.”

And he did return, many times, for in his loveless domination of that wretched girl he had taken a step closer to adopting the ways of man. He had come to see that there was little difference between the city and the jungle, that “civilization” was merely a name given to comfort, and that the process of life in *Sangue do Lume* obeyed the same uncivilized laws as did the excesses of the sortilene. What point was there in warring against man? And, in any case, how could he win such a war? His touch was a useless power against an enemy who could summon countless allies from its worlds behind the sky.

Over the ensuing weeks the arcevoalo grew ever more despondent, and in the throes of despondency the human elements of his soul grew more and more predominant. At dusk

his reverie was troubled by images of lust and conquest stirred from the memories of João Merin Nascimento. And his work aboard Orlando's ship became so proficient that Caudez do Tuscanduva held a fete in his honor, a night of delirium and pleasure during which a constellation of his profile appeared in the sky, and the swaying of the palms was choreographed by artificial winds, and the machines within the walls were turned high, beautifying everyone to such an extent that everyone's heart was broken . . . broken, and then healed by the consumption of tiny, soft-boned animals that induced a narcissistic ecstasy when eaten alive. Despite his revulsion for this practice, the arcevoalo indulged in it, and, his teeth stained with blood, he spent the remainder of the night wandering the incomparably beautiful streets and gazing longingly at himself in mirrors.

Thereafter Caudez do Tuscanduva took Orlando and the arcevoalo under his wing, telling them they were to be his protégés, that he had great plans for them. Further, he urged them to pay court to Sylvana, saying that, yes, she was an icy sort, but the right man would be able to thaw her. In this Orlando needed no urging. He plied her with gifts and composed lyrics to her charms. But Sylvana was disdainful of his efforts, and though for the most part she was equally disdainful of the arcevoalo, now and then she would favor him with a chil-

ly smile, which — while scarcely encouraging — made Orlando quite jealous.

"You'd do better to set your sights elsewhere," the arcevoalo once told Orlando. "Even if you win her, you'll regret it. She's the kind of woman who uses marriage like a vise, and before you know it she'll have you squealing like a stuck pig." He had no idea whether or not this was true — it was something he had overheard another disappointed suitor say — but it accorded with his own impressions of her. He believed that Orlando was leaving himself open to the possibility of grievous hurt, and he told him as much. No matter how forcefully he argued, though, Orlando refused to listen.

"I know you're only trying to protect me, friend," he said. "And perhaps you're right. But this is an affair of the heart, and the heart is ruled by its own counsel."

And so the arcevoalo could do nothing more than to step aside and let Orlando have a clear field with Sylvana.

On one occasion Caudez invited them to dine at the governor's mansion. They sat at a long mahogany table graced by golden candelabra through whose branches the arcevoalo watched Sylvana daintily picking at her food, ignoring the heated glances that Orlando sent her way. After the meal, Caudez led them into his study, its windows open onto the orchid-spangled courtyard where Sylvana

could be seen strolling — as elegant as an orchid herself — and held forth on his scheme to milk the resources of the Amazon: how he would reopen the gold mines at Serra Pelada, reinstitute the extensive-farming procedures that once had brought an unparalleled harvest, and thus feed and finance hundreds of new orbital colonies. Orlando's attention was fixed upon Sylvana, but the arcevoalo listened closely. Cadez, with his piratical air and his dream of transforming the Amazon into a tame backyard, struck him as being a force equal to the jungle. Pacing up and down, declaiming about the glorious future, Cadez seemed to walk with the pride of a continent. Late in the evening he turned his fierce black stare upon the arcevoalo and questioned him about his past. The questions were complex, fraught with opportunities for the arcevoalo to compromise the secret of his birth; he had to summon all his wits to avoid these pitfalls, and he wondered if Cadez were suspicious of him. But then Cadez laughed and clapped him on the shoulder, saying what a marvel he was, and that allayed his fears.

**W**hereas in the jungle, time passed in a dark green flow, a single fluid moment infinitely prolonged, within the walls of Sangue do Lume it passed in sharply delineated segments so that occasionally one would be-

come alerted to the fact that a certain period had elapsed — this due to the minuscule interruptions in the flow of time caused by the instruments men have for measuring it. And thus it was that one morning the arcevoalo awoke to the realization that he had lived in the city for a year. A year! And what progress had he made? His life, which had once had the form of purpose, of a quest, had resolved into a passive shape defined by his associations: his friendship with Orlando (whose wooing of Sylvana had reached fever pitch), his sexual encounters with Ana, his apprenticeship to Cadez. Each night he was reminded of his deeper associations with the jungle by the huge shadow that obscured the stars, yet he felt trapped between the two worlds, at home in neither, incapable of effecting any change. He might have continued at this impasse had not Ana announced to him one evening that she was with child. It would be, according to the old woman who had listened to her belly, a son. Standing in the garish light of her burning Christ, displaying her new roundness, flushed with a love no longer dependent on his touch, she presented him with a choice he could not avoid making. If he did nothing, his son would be born into the world of men; he had to be certain this was right.

But how could he decide such a complex issue, one that had baffled him for an entire year?

At the point of desperation, he remembered the old Indian man and his "truth," and that same night, after the machines in the walls had been switched off, leaving the flaking white-wash of the buildings exposed, he sneaked into the warehouse where the plant samples were kept and pilfered a quantity of asuero flowers. He returned to the Valverde house, ground the petals into a fine powder, and ate the entire amount. Soon pearls of sweat beaded on his forehead, his limbs trembled, and the moonlight flooding his room appeared to grow brighter than day.

Truth came to him in the clarity of his vision. Between the floorboards he saw microscopic insects and plants, and darting through the air were even tinier incidences of life. From these sights he understood anew that the city and the jungle were interpenetrating. Just as the ruins of Manaus lay beneath the foliage, so did the jungle's skeins infiltrate the living city. One was not good, the other evil. They were two halves of a whole, and the war between them was not truly a war but an everlasting pattern, a game in which he was a powerful pawn moved from the grotesque chessboard of Manaus to the neat squares of Sangue do Lume, a move that had set in motion a pawn of perhaps even greater power: his son. He realized now that no matter with which side he cast his lot, his son would make the opposite choice,

for it was an immutable truth that fathers and sons go contrary to the other's will. Thus he had to make his own choice according to the dictates of his soul. A soul in confusion. And to dissolve that confusion, to know his options fully, he had to complete his knowledge of man by understanding the nature of love. He thought first of going to Ana, of infecting himself with the chemicals of his touch and falling under her spell; but then he recognized that the kind of love he sought to understand — the all-consuming love that motivates and destroys — had to embody the quality of the unattainable. With this in mind, still trembling from the fevers of the asuero powder, he went out again into the night and headed toward the governor's mansion, toward the unattainable Sylvana.

Since the concept of security in Sangue do Lume was chiefly geared to keeping the jungle out, the systems protecting the mansion were minimal, easily penetrated by a creature of the arcevoalo's stealth. He crept up the stairs, along the hall, cracked Sylvana's door, and eased inside. As was the custom with high-born women of the city, she was sleeping nude beneath a skylight through which the rays of the moon shone down in a silvery fan. A diamond pulsed coldly in the hollow of her throat, a tourmaline winked between her breasts, and in the tuft of her secret hair — trimmed to the



shape of an orchid — an emerald shimmered wetly. These gems were bound in place by silken threads and were no ordinary stones but crystal-line machines that focused the moonlight downward to produce a salubrious effect upon the organs, and also served as telltales of those organs' health. The unclouded states of the emerald, the tourmaline, and the diamond testified that Sylvana was virginal and of sound heart and respiration. But she was so lovely that the arcevoalo would not have cared if the stones had been black, signaling wantonness and infection. Rivulets of blonde hair streamed over her porcelain shoulders, and the soft brush of sleep had smoothed away her brittleness of expression, giving her the look of an angel under an enchantment.

Fixing his gaze upon her, the arcevoalo gripped his left forearm with the fingers of his right hand and pressed down hard. He maintained the grip for some time, uncertain how much of the chemical would be needed to affect him — indeed, he was uncertain whether or not he could be affected. But soon he felt a languorous sensation that made his eyelids droop and stilled the trembling caused by the asuero powder. When he opened his eyes, the sight of the naked Sylvana pierced him: it was as if an essential color had all along been missing from his portrait of her. Staring at her through the doubled

lens of truth and love, he knew her coldness, her cunning and duplicity; yet he perceived these flaws in the way he might have perceived the fracture planes inside a crystal, how they channeled the light to create a lovely illusion of depth and complexity. Faint with desire, he walked over to the bed. A branching of bluish veins spread from the tops of her breasts, twined together and vanished beneath the diamond in the hollow of her throat, as if deriving sustenance from the stone; a tiny mole lay like a drop of obsidian by the corner of her lips. Carefully, knowing she could never truly love him, yet willing to risk his life to have her love this one and false time, he stretched out a hand and clamped it over Sylvana's mouth, while with the other hand he gripped her shoulder hard. Her eyes shot open, she squealed and kicked and clawed. He held her firmly, waiting for the chemistry of love to take effect. But it did not. Astounded, he examined his fingertips. They were dry, and he realized that in his urgency to know love he had exhausted the potency of his touch. He was full of despair, knowing he would have to flee the city . . . but then Sylvana's struggles ceased. The panic in her eyes softened, and she drew him into an embrace, whispering that her fearful reaction was due to the shock of being awakened so roughly, that she had been hoping for this moment ever since they had met. And with the

power of truth which — though diminished by the truth of love — still allowed him a modicum of clear sight, the arcevoalo saw that, indeed, she had been hoping for this moment. She seemed charged with desire, overwhelmed by a passion no less ardent than his. But when he entered her, sinking into her plush warmth, he felt a nugget of chill against his belly; he knew it was the diamond bound by its silken thread, yet he could not help thinking of it as a node of her quintessential self that not even love could dissolve.

Some hours later, after the power of truth had been drained for the arcevoalo, Sylvana spoke to him. "Leave me," she said. "I have no more use for you." She was standing by the open door, smiling at him; the threads of her telltale jewels dangled from her right hand.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "What use have you made of me?" He was shocked by the wealth of cruelty in her smile, by her transformation from the voluptuous, the soft, into this glacial creature with glittering eyes.

She laughed — a thin, hard laugh that seemed to chart the jagged edge of a vengeful thought. "I've never known such a fool," she said. "It's hard to believe you're even a man. I wondered if I'd have to drag you into my bed."

Again she laughed, and, suddenly afraid, the arcevoalo pulled on his

clothes and ran, her derisive laughter chasing him down the hall and out into the dove-gray dawn of Sangué do Lume, whose machines were already beginning to restore a fraudulent perfection to its flaking walls.

**A**ll that day the arcevoalo kept to his room in the Valverde house. He knew he should leave the city before Sylvana called down judgment upon him, but he found that he could not leave her, no matter how little affection she had for him. He understood now the nature of love, its blurred, irrational compulsions, its torments and its joys, and he doubted it would ever loosen its grip on him. But understanding it had made his choice no easier, and so perhaps he did not entirely understand, perhaps he did not see that love enforces its own continuum of choices, even upon an inhuman celebrant. There was no end to his confusion. One moment he would feel drawn back to the jungle, the next he would wonder how he could have considered such a reckless course. At dusk his reverie alternated between a perception of formless urges and a sequence of memories in which João Merín Nascimento staggered through a green hell, his brain afire and death a poisoned sugar clotting his veins. Night fell, and having some frail hope that Sylvana would do nothing, that things might go on as before, the arcevoalo left the

house and walked toward the main square.

Though it was no holiday, though no fete had been scheduled, of all the beautiful nights in *Sangue do Lume*, this night came the closest to perfection, marred only by the whining of the machines functioning at peak levels. In the square the palm crowns flickered like green torches beneath an unequaled array of stars, and beams of light from the windows shone like benedictions upon the fountain, whose spouts cast up sprays of silver droplets that fell to the ear as a cascade of guitar notes. Against the backdrop of gray stones and white stucco, the graceful attitudes of the young men and women, strolling and dueling, lost in a haze of mutual admiration, seemed a tapestry come to life. Even the arcevoalo's grim mood was brightened by the scene, but on drawing near the group of young men gathered about Orlando, on hearing Orlando's boastful voice, his mood darkened once again.

"... his blessing to Sylvana and I," Orlando was saying. "We'll be wed during the Festival of Erzulie."

The arcevoalo pushed through the group of listeners and confronted Orlando, too enraged to speak. Orlando put a hand on his shoulder. "My friend!" he said. "Great news!" But the arcevoalo struck his hand aside and said, "Your news is a lie! You will never marry her!"

It may have been that Orlando

thought his friend was still trying to protect him from a loveless marriage, for he said, "Don't worry . . ."

"It's I who made love to her last night," the arcevoalo cut in. "And it's I who'll marry her."

Orlando reached for his cintral, whose green tendrils were dangling over the edge of the fountain; but he hesitated. Perhaps it was friendship that stayed his hand, or perhaps he believed that the arcevoalo's friendship was so great that he would lie and risk a duel to prevent the marriage.

Then a woman laughed — a thin derisive laugh.

The arcevoalo turned and saw Sylvana and Caudez standing a dozen feet away. Hanging from a gold chain about Sylvana's neck was her telltale emerald, its blackness expressing the malefic use she had made of her body the previous night. Caudez was smiling, a crescent of white teeth showing forth from his thicket of a beard.

Finally convinced that his friend had told the truth, Orlando's face twisted into an aggrieved knot, displaying his humiliation and pain. He picked up the cintral and lashed out at the arcevoalo. The sharp tendrils slithered through the air like liquid green swords; but at the last second — recognizing their ally — they veered aside, spasmed, and drooped lifelessly from Orlando's hand. His mind a boil of rage, unable by logic to direct his anger toward his true ene-

my, the arcevoalo plucked a knife from a bystander's sash and plunged it deep into Orlando's chest. As Orlando toppled onto his back, a hush fell over the assemblage, for never had they witnessed a death more beautiful than that of the Valverde's eldest son. The palms inclined their spiky heads, the fountain wept tears of crystalline music. Orlando's features aquired a noble rectitude they had not had in life; his blood shone with a saintly radiance and appeared to be spelling out a new language of poetry over the cobblestones.

"Now!" cried Caudez do Tuscan-duva, his black eyes throwing off glints that were no reflections but sparks of an inner fire banked high. "Now has the great wrong done my father by the House of Valverde been avenged! And not by my hand!"

Murmurs of admiration for the subtlety of his vengeance spread through the crowd. But the arcevoalo — gone cold with the horror of his act, full of self-loathing at having allowed himself to be manipulated — advanced upon Caudez and Sylvana, his knife at the ready.

"Kill him!" shouted Caudez, exhorting the young men. "I have no quarrel with his choice of victims, but he has struck down a man whose weapon failed him. Such cowardice must not go unpunished!"

And the young men, who had always suspected the arcevoalo of being lowborn and thus had no love for

him, ranged themselves in front of Caudez and Sylvana, posing a barrier of grim faces and shining knives.

When men refer to the arcevoalo, they speak not only of the one who stood then beside the fountain, but also of his incarnations, and they will tell you that none of these ever fought so bravely in victory as did their original in defeat that night in Sangue do Lume. Fueled by the potentials of hatred and love (though that love had been mingled with bitterness), he spun and leaped, living in a chaos of agonized faces and flowers of blood blooming on silk blouses; and while the sad music of the fountain evolved into a skirling tantara, he left more than twenty dead in his wake, cutting a path toward Caudez and Sylvana. He received wounds that would have killed a man yet merely served to goad him on, and utilizing all his moon-given elusiveness, he avoided the most consequential of the young men's thrusts. In the end, however, there were too many young men, too many knives, and, weakening, he knew he would not be able to reach the governor and his daughter.

There came a moment of calm in the storm of battle, a moment when nine of the young men had hemmed the arcevoalo in against the fountain. Others waited their chance behind them. They were wary of him now, yet confident, and they all wore one expression: the dogged, stuporous expression that comes with the antici-

pation of a slaughter. Their unanimity weakened the arcevoalo further, and he thought it might be best to lay his weapon down and accept his fate. The young men sidled nearer, shifting their knives from hand to hand; the music of the fountain built to a glorious crescendo of trumpets and guitars, and the pale, beautiful bodies of the dead enmeshed in a lacework of blood seemed to be entreating the arcevoalo, tempting him to join them in their eternal poise. But in the next moment he spotted Caudez smiling at him between the shoulders of his adversaries, and Sylvana laughing at his side. That sight rekindled the arcevoalo's rage. With an open-throated scream, choosing his target in a flash of poignant bitterness, he hurled his knife. The blade whirled end over end, accumulating silver fire, growing brighter and brighter until its hilt sprouted from Sylvana's breast. Before anyone could take note of the artful character of her death, she sank beneath the feet of the milling defenders, leaving Caudez to stare in horror at the droplets of her blood stippling his chest. And then, seizing the opportunity provided by the young men's consternation, the arcevoalo ran from the square, through the flawless streets and into the Favelin, past the hovel where Ana and his unborn son awaited an unguessable future in the light of her dying god. He clambered over the gray metal wall and sprinted into the jungle.

Such was the efficacy of the city's machines that even the natural beauty of the moonlit jungle had been enhanced. It seemed to the arcevoalo that he was passing through an intricate design of silver and black, figured by the glowing eyes of those creatures who had come forth from hiding to honor his return. Despite his wounds, his panic, he had a sense of homecoming, of peacefulness and dominion. He came at length to a mountaintop east of Sangué do Lume and paused there to catch his breath. His muscles urged him onward, but his thoughts — heavy with the poisons of murder and betrayal — were a sickly ballast holding him in place. At any second, ships would arrow up from the city to track him, and he thought now that he would welcome them.

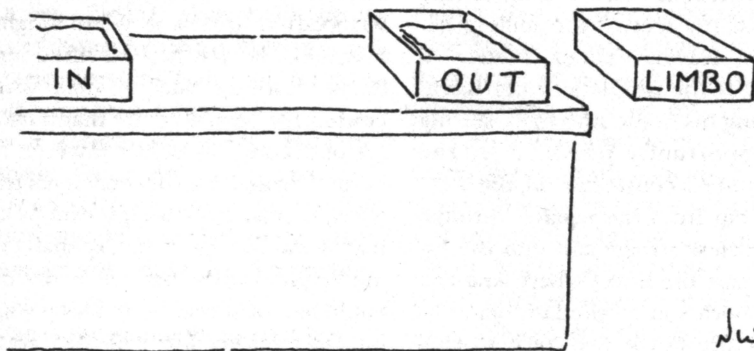
But as he stood there, grieving and empty of hope, a shadow obscured the stars: a great rippling field of shadow that swooped down and wrapped him in its filmy, almost weightless folds. He felt himself lifted and borne eastward and — after what could have been no more than a matter of seconds — gently lowered to earth. Through the dim opacity of the folds, he made out a high canopy of leaves and branches, silvery shafts of moonlight, and a bed of ferns. He could feel the creature merging with him, its folds becoming fibrous, gradually thickening to a husk, and — recalling the darkness that had passed

from him at birth — he realized that this incomprehensible shadow was the death that had been born with him, had haunted all his nights, and had come at last to define the shape of his life.

The world dwindled to a dark green vibration, and with half his soul he yearned toward the pleasures of the city, toward love, toward all the sweet futilities of the human condition. But with the other half he exulted in the knowledge that his purpose had been achieved, that he had understood the nature of man. And (a final intuition) he knew that someday, long after he had decayed into a clay of old memories, just as it had with the bones of João Merin Nascimento, the jungle would breed from his bones a new creature, who — guided by his understanding — would make of love a weapon and of war a passion, and would bring inspired

tactics to the eternal game. This knowledge gave him a measure of happiness, but that was soon eroded by his fear of what lay — or did not lie — ahead.

Something nudged the outside of the thickening husk. The arcevoalo peered out, straining to see, and spied the ruby eyes of a malgatón peering in at him, come to give him the comfort of dreams. Grateful, not wanting to feel the snip of death's black scissors, he concentrated on those strange pupils, watching them shift and dissolve and grow spidery, and then it was as if he were running again, running in the joyful way he had before he had reached Sangue do Lume, running in a harmony of green light and birds, in a wind that sang like a harp on fire, in a moment that seemed to last forever and lead beyond to other lives.



*Michael Shea ("Uncle Tuggs," May 1986) has become known for the witty, irreverent horror in his short stories, and "Fill It With Regular" is no exception. In this tale he takes an everyday event — the filling of one's gas tank — to an alien, eerie and amusing conclusion.*

# Fill It with Regular

BY  
MICHAEL SHEA

I

**I**t was just past 3:00 a.m. An all-night gas station stood on its lonely little asphalt atoll, a delta bordered by two convergent country roads. Not far beyond this confluence, the two-lane blacktop passed under a freeway. Up there, along 101's unsleeping corridors, big semis boomed and groaned, their frequency abated at this hour, but still clocklike. Down here on ground level, however, below the imperial elevation of that viaduct, all was country darkness, country silence full of crickets. The black shapes of the roadside trees shrank and islanded the station's light between them, big, half-naked oaks, crooked against the stars.

The attendant stood by one of the

pumps. His khaki jacket — with "Al" stitched in red over one pocket — was thin, but he stood relaxed, even slack-armed, in the chill air. In fact, in the absence of muscle tone from his sharp-nosed face, there was something faintly moronic.

A pair of headlights sank down the freeway off-ramp and approached. Al shifted slightly on his feet and worked his fingers. An old, dented blue Maverick sighed on worn tires up to the pumps. The driver was a large, rather drunk-looking man. His horn-rims, one hinge sutured with black tape, sat on his nose a shade askew. Two or three of his lower teeth were missing, and his chin stubble was gray in patches. His air was cordial.

"A glad good evening to you! Just fill this puppy to the brim with Regular!"

Al nodded eagerly. Still, an uncertainty entered his manner after he unholstered the gas nozzle. The drunk blinked, smacked his forehead.

"Ach! Where's my *mind*?"

He hauled himself from the car, and an empty Ranier Ale can followed him out and tap-danced briefly on the asphalt. Dragging out his keys and moving sternwards, he unlocked his gas cap, set it on the trunk lid, and returned to his seat, all with a kind of staggy flourish.

Al filled the tank. A gush of excess foamed down the Maverick's tail, making a clean stripe across the dirty license plate. Al released the trigger. Still hesitant, but moving hopefully now, Al reholstered the nozzle. The drunk, squinting at the gauge, hoisted his hip for money — his unseen feet, shifting, raised the musical jostle of bottles. Peeling open a distorted lump of wallet, the drunk poked inside. He rummaged. He blinked. He raised a look heavenward and signed as at some relentless, long-known enemy, now plaguing him anew.

"Will you *believe* this, man? Will you fuckin' believe this? I've only got a ten here! I should have looked! I should have fuckin' *looked* before I told you to fill it! But hey, listen. Look here. I don't live far off. Over that way somewhere. Take this now, and I'll bring you back the other two fifty, if not tonight, then first thing in the morning."

Al was watching him with a kind

of raptness. He kept nodding nervously, as if in sign of noting important information. The drunk beamed.

"You're an ace, man! An ace! Just stick that in your pocket, and before another moon rises, I'll be back with its two little buddies! God bless!"

Looking genuinely moved, the drunk cracked another beer and sipped it as he drove off, dribbling gas at the stern. As he dipped the driveway, his gas cap tumbled off the trunk and rolled to the gutter as he accelerated away.

Al resumed his position by the Regular pump. Then a thought seemed to strike him. He went into the office, and through its connecting door into the locked garage. Here the legs of a man on a mechanic's underdolly thrust out from beneath a station wagon with its hood up. Al got some wrenches from one of the shelves along the back wall and laid them on the pavement beside the dolly.

Standing again by the pump, Al seemed less catatonic than he had. His hands were more restive, task-ready, and his lips moved faintly, as though rehearsing words. From the freeway, another pair of headlights sank toward the empty corridors of oak shadows. A big new Cadillac slid its flawless, dark-cream paint job up to the pumps.

It held a middle-aged couple, the Fennermans. They had been dining with their friends the Crosses and



were in a pleasant mood. Fred Cross, who also ran a new-car dealership, had let slip to Ted enough about his business to make Ted realize that his own lot had been doing pretty damn well lately by comparison. Gail Fennerman, for her part, had been deeply pleased by the enchiladas Muriel Cross had made, and no less pleased by the seven margaritas she had washed them down with. Al marched to the window as Ted rolled it down. He looked hopeful now, determined.

"Hi! Fill it with Regular?" His energy bordered on the intimidating.

"Oh no!" Ted Fennerman chuckled uneasily. "Supreme! It's Supreme all the way with these babies, right?"

"Ah!" said Al, seeming crestfallen. He brightened at a thought. "Want to give me your keys?"

"Right," said Ted, separating out his gas key so that the rest hung from it, and putting it between Al's fingertips. Al marched back, unlocked the cap, laid it on the trunk. He got the hose, which he handled now with increased panache. He began to fill the Caddy's tank.

"What a strange man," Gail Fennerman said.

"I'll say. I guess, though, that you'd have to be some kind of a loony to take a job like this in the first place. the boredom would drive a sane guy nuts."

"Teddy?"

"Yeah?"

"Isn't he filling us with Regular anyway?"

"Hey! Hey! Stop that!" Ted thrust almost half himself out the window. "Cut that out!"

"Right," said Al. Even then the overflow puddled beneath the plate.

"What the hell is *wrong* with you?" keened Ted. "Didn't I tell you *Supreme*? Didn't I say that *specifically*?"

Hanging up the nozzle, Al gave a thoughtful nod. "You *did* say Supreme specifically. Yes." He tucked the Fennermans' keys into the pocket containing the drunk's ten-dollar bill.

"Hey!" Ted half-erupted again. "Gimme back my *keys*!"

"Oh," said Al, blinking. Returning the keys, he cleared his throat. "It's O.K. if you just give me ten dollars. You can bring the rest by later tonight, or first thing in the morning."

"I don't understand you," Ted Fennerman said slowly, astonishedly. He forgot even to contest payment. "Here's my credit card."

"Oh," said Al. He inspected the card carefully, and then put it in his pocket with the ten-dollar bill.

"What the hell are you doing?" Ted sounded hushed, awed. "Give me back my god-damned credit card!"

Al — perplexed, mouth ajar — returned the card. Pocketing it, Ted Fennerman hesitated only an instant over the legal risk of leaving without paying — then he fired up the car and pulled out. Gail's head turned, she

spoke, and the Caddy lurched to a stop just short of the driveway. Ted popped out. Keeping his hands on the car, as if for cover, he hurried astern of her, replaced the gas cap, dove back inside, and slid the car up into the darkness between the star-hung trees.

Al walked to the driveway, picked the drunk's gas cap from the gutter, and gazed at it, nodding owlshly. He pocketed it and returned to the Regular pump. Unholstering the nozzle, he put its tip to his mouth and triggered himself a couple of hearty gulps. Smacking his lips, he seemed to judge the savor. He went into the office and came out with a small, dark sack.

He went to one of the brass-hatched intake valves whereby the trucks fed the station's cisterns. He keyed it open, dug from the bag a handful of black dust, and dropped it in. He shut the hatch, returned the bag to the office. He resumed his post at the Regular pump. Again his lips seemed to practice, voicelessly, as his eyes looked around at the country darkness environing his little wedge of light.

## II

**N**ext morning around eight, Ted Fennerman started siphoning the gas from his tank into a pair of cans from the garage. The engine had gotten

detectably shuddery in just the few miles home from that miserable station. There had seemed a kind of juvenile delinquent fun in the siphoning just at first, but his first draw was too prolonged, and he got a mouthful that soured the whole thing. He cursed the oil company whose logo had crowned that station, a seeming oasis down in the shadowlands, as seen from 101, which they had crested so serenely at sixty-five. Why hadn't he kept going? It was his own fault for being so compulsive about keeping the tank full. He called his local station to send out a tow truck with some Supreme.

With tepid breakfast coffee, he rinsed the fumes from his mouth. When the tow truck arrived, he recognized the kid driving it — slight and pimply, but peppy. Today, though, he was so vague and slothful in his actions that Ted took the can and poured the gas into the Caddy himself. When Ted tipped him a buck, the kid didn't seem to know what to do with it. When the hell was happening? The Caddy thrummed and pinged all the way in to his car lot in Santa Rosa. He ground his teeth and swore as he drove. He might as well not have bothered changing the gas at all. He got to his desk around ten in a foul mood. He realized that, unmistakably, he had the beginnings of a sore throat.

It was a little after eleven when

the drunk, an artist named Ken, got up. He had a good reason for getting up so early: he had to go see Dale and borrow a hundred dollars from his academic friend. Starburst Paperbacks still owed Ken six hundred on his last cover, but far be it from them to speed payment. He washed his face. He warmed up some pizza and poured a beer. He hummed between sips, waiting for the cheese to remelt. It was a nuisance having to borrow money, but afterward they could drink and bullshit and watch cable TV—Dale got all the channels.

He went out to his car around noon. He threw his traveling sketch pad — for ideas that obtruded themselves upon his drinking time — in through the passenger window and circled round behind the car. Feeling an odd crackliness to the asphalt underfoot, he paused, looked down — and noticed he lacked his gas cap.

"Shit!" he said.

He drove back to the gas station, trying to keep all his accelerations smooth. It hadn't seemed that cold last night, certainly was not now, yet the roadway still felt faintly crisp under his tires. He pulled into the station. The garage's overhead door was now up, displaying someone on the floor dolly half under a station wagon. Al was standing near the Regular pump. Ken got out.

"Hi, Al!" he cried, noting only now the red-stitched name. "Say, did I leave my gas cap here last night?"

"You sure did!"

"Ah, great! That's a relief!" There was a smiling pause. "Well," Ken prodded. "Can I have it back?"

"Why don't I get it for you? It's in the office!"

"Great idea!" Ken hung around the doorway of the garage while Al went in. Al seemed more sure of himself, much brisker today. On the other hand, Ken realized, he hadn't seen the guy under the car move very much at all.

"Ha!" he offered. "Great place for a nap, hey?" The guy didn't move or answer. Ken shrugged. Some assholes just didn't have a sense of humor. Al brought him his cap and smiled:

"Fill her up with Regular for you?"

Ken laughed. "I didn't lose *that* much. Thanks anyway. So long!" Inwardly he sighed, driving off — the two fifty was forgotten. He'd scrounged up only two dollars anyway, and now he could get a sixer of Buckhorn with it. He slid on down Old Redwood Highway — which stretched bright, almost silvery before him — and smiled skyward at the fresh fall sunlight.

Gail Fennerman awoke numb, feeling nibbled away around the edges, at 12:30. Before moving, like a swimmer who chooses the bit of distant coast he will strike toward, she determined two of the things she would do today. First, have a sauna at the gym. Second, have a flame-broiled

patty-melt at the Fern 'n Burger. The first would atone in advance for the second, for Gail equated sweating with calorie loss.

She rose. She reached the shower, her legs feeling of unequal length. In the kitchen, her protein smoothie whirled strenuously in the blender, growling aggressively. Swallowing it was an act of grim will, such as she imagined it must take to lift weights, or learn French.

Confronting her mirror to make up, she asked it sarcastically: "Do you think you can drive? See? It really makes you *look* forty-three, every day of it!" She didn't even like the smell of alcohol, but these delicious cocktails, like Bloody Marys or margaritas, were her downfall. Last night she had, self-mockingly, kept mental count of her margaritas, but, perversely, this only enhanced the pleasure of the indulgence. Ted was partly to blame — he didn't even *go* to the gym anymore, even just for the Jacuzzi. His getting so paunchy, after he'd *promised*, undermined her own resolve. Not much past two o'clock, she locked the front door and crunched down the driveway to her Buick.

Crunched? On firm asphalt? She paused. The sun, sloping past zenith, delicately shadowed a kind of translucent fur, perhaps a quarter inch deep, covering most of the drive, with an especially thick circular patch just behind where Ted always parked the Cadillac. She scuffed at the stuff

with the toe of her designer track shoe. It was crackly, but seemed to be giving rather than breaking under the prodding. She shook her head. As a SoCal girl, she had always deplored the creepy growths that northern California's lushness fostered. She fired up the Buick and turned on the Montavani tape she had left in the deck. She sped down the silvery highway — it *was* rather glittery today, wasn't it?

At the gym the strangest thing happened. With two other women, one of whom she knew slightly, she was sitting in the sauna. Tina Claymore, who managed a boutique in Coddington Center, was saying to Gail:

"Boy, this dry heat can sure get to your nose and throat sometimes, can't it?"

"Yeah. Mine really feels scratchy, too. What's that on your legs, Tina?"

Both bent to inspect Tina's pallid thighs, flattened to ovoids on the sweat-dark bench. Her thighs looked dusty. A vanishingly fine, faint soot besprinkled them. Tina brushed at it, but it smeared into her sweat. "Look!" the third woman told Gail. "It's on *your* arms and legs, too!"

"Yow! And yours, too!"

For a moment the three ladies twisted and splayed themselves to present all their surfaces to the weak, sulfurous light — patting and spanking at their limbs, till all at once the scene they made struck them and

they all shakily laughed, and trooped out.

They were in the showers, soaping lustily, when the instructress got back to them. She pushed her twenty-year-old, T-shirted upper half into the room and told them brightly:

"I was right! Rod says it's just a little soot — the gas heaters have been burning a little sooty all day!"

The girl's sunny self-approval vexed Tina Claymore, to whom soap-suds gave clownishly exaggerated breasts, as though some grotesque lichen had overgrown them. "Well that's just peachy! Peachy! Why didn't you *tell* us?"

"I haven't been in the sauna today," the girl said, looking stung. "Rod just forgot, I guess. It'll wash right off, won't it?"

"But it still *itches*. And what about my nose and throat? They're scratchy, too!"

Gail privately agreed that her skin also felt a bit prickly, but she didn't detain herself to make an issue of it. Purposefully, she dried and dressed. It was patty-melt time at the Fern 'n Burger.

From there she called Ted at four, to see if there were any errands that needed running before things started closing. Ted didn't feel like talking. He had "a goddamned sore throat." He said he'd meet her at eight at The Cattleman's for dinner, and hung up. Just as she returned to her table, her food arrived. It was exquisite, except

that the meat had an odd extra crispness and — very faint, so discreet as to be rather pleasing — a slight bitterness.

### III

**D**ale was an entomologist out at Sonoma State. He had bought one of the little motor courts — proto-motels of thirties vintage — still to be found decaying along Old River Highway, which had been the 101 of the pre-freeway era. The office and the first two cabins were built of a piece, and this structure Dale had inhabited. By knocking out the connecting walls, he had created a single large living space with three bathroom cubicles, the office kitchen, and the old registration desk left standing by the office door, the only one Dale made use of.

A Charlie Musselwhite tape raunched and wailed room-fillingly. Near the entry the TV, sans sound track, beamed the Playboy Channel, which Ken, a great lounge and sprawler, watched from the couch. He had a Buckhorn in one hand, the remote control in the other, and in his thoughts the hard truth, ever less ignorable, that they were out of beer. Dale was more of a pacer and an arm waver, and he was near the rear of the room. Here were the bookshelves and dart board, and here he liked to do much of his ranting and raving,

while throwing darts. A blown-up photo of an ant, pinned to a corkboard, was his target. Big and shambling though Dale was, and eruptive with his restless thoughts, time and again the patterns of six darts he threw came creditably close to pinning all the insect's feet — Ken glanced over and checked now and then. Dale had paused in his monologue, and Ken sighed.

"So come on, man! Money me! We need some more beer — you've been pecking at that one can for the last hour."

"It was the only one I got my hands on in your whole six-pack!"

"Wait," said Ken, palm raised. There was a wet T-shirt contest on the screen, and the guy with the bucket had finally gotten to the brunette. Ken watched her get it. "So?" he resumed. "All the more reason to get some more."

"It's amazing!" Dale grinned, poking another dart into the air. It landed in the ant's upper right tarsus. "How routinely, with such minimal effort, you get money out of me! A few solicitational gestures — a bow, a tap of the antennae, a nudge to the gullet — and I disgorge a big, fat drop of my hard-earned nectar. Just like *Atta texana*."

"Don't be an asshole. You *know* you have it, you *know* you'll get it back, you *know* in the meantime I'll buy beer and enchiladas with it, and you *know* you're going to lend it to me in the end!"

"That's exactly it!" Dale crowed. "I'm going to do it! And I seem to have no more power over regurgitating this sugary blob of monetary energy than the poor insect does!"

"You're a scientist, Dale! Energy is collected in nature only to be utilized, dispensed, dissipated — converted into some other form. Beer, in this case."

Dale, not listening, smiled at his own thought: "And I let you sap me, you see, of that sugary blob, for one reason alone, one that should make all scientists humble. Because even the smartest of them — why, even I — even I am no more essentially free of my nature than the lowly bugs I study!" He threw a dart, which lodged a quarter inch off the mid-right tarsal claw. Ken regarded Dale.

"I think that's just incredibly humble of you, Dale."

Dale took up his beer. He began his professional patrol of the big room, pacing comfortably, causing for Ken two regular eclipses of the TV screen as he orbited. He said:

"It's a fact! A fact made banal by the facile affirmation of the heedless! You, Kenny, though only an artist, might guess at the arrogance that can go with a little knowledge among scientists. However much as we know and can do, we mustn't swagger through the cosmos. Inevitably, some form exists that's perfectly adapted to exploit us in spite of all our technical furnishings."

Ken, musing, laughed. Dale's length of limb, the seemingly erratic emphasis of his movements, *were* ant-like. "I have to buy that image, Dale. I'd like to draw you that way — as an *Atta* worker disgorging your wallet from gaping mandibles."

Dale was nodding as he paced, assenting not to Ken, but to another dawning insight of his own. "Look here, Kenny. You've always confessed that my erudition gives you graphic inspirations. So to hell with this piddling parasitism — a hundred here, a hundred there. Let's get a real mutualism going." Dale's orbital speed increased as he warmed to the idea. "I'll ape that noble scale insect so famous for her fungal parasite. I'll be industrious *Cbionaspis corni*, pumping the sap of learning from my academic branch. You, of course, will be *Septobasidium*, the fungus whose spores I ingest and that sprouts from the interstices of my dorsal sclera. At first, you see, I house you, and I feed your *oeuvre* from my brimming brain. Soon, you're making real bucks in the art racket, and the tables turn. You house *me* grandly, as the embowering fungus doth the bug! Muriel moves in, we mate and reproduce and live as your coddled tenants from then on. The analogy's not perfect, of course. *Septobasidium* sterilizes its living plant pot. It's her sisters' offspring that the fungal tenement roofs and feeds with its plumb sporangia. In our case, my *own* reproduction would

be fostered by the setup — all the better for science, of course."

"I dunno, Dale, I can't quite picture this one. Me growing out of the cracks in your dorsal sclera and all. Suppose I think about it, and meanwhile you give me the fucking money so we can get some beer?"

Still smiling in the afterglow of his ironic vision, Dale tossed Ken his wallet. "Finally!" Ken said. He plucked the money and tossed the wallet back. "So let's make it a ride — take Reibli through the hills a ways. Bring the Ry Cooder tape."

Dale took the tape from the rack. "Time's a-wastin', Sonny!" he said, following Ken out the door. He paused to lock it, and turned as Ken was firing up the Maverick. Where the exhaust boiled against the drive, Dale thought he saw an odd glitter, but he was impatient to ride out and take the sun, and just got into the car.

Their windows overflowing Cooder's *Trouble*, Dale patting time on the doorsill with his jutting elbow, they roared down Redwood, up Mark West, and swung onto Reibli, which meandered along the hills just under their crests. In a pause between cuts, Ken asked:

"What's that? That crackling, hear it?"

They pulled onto the shoulder and got out. What they found shocked them. They saw it best when they squatted on the shoulder and looked at the road surface along the angle of

incidence of the latening sunlight: a fine, translucent furriness perhaps a half inch deep, all over the asphalt. It was finer, really, than the finest fur, yet its countless fibrils were made opulently distinct by the glints of diffraction their innumerable curvatures shed. The friends gaped at each other, poked and pinched the stuff.

"As far as you can see!" Ken said. "the whole road!"

"It's *tough*, Kenny! The tires don't crush it! It springs back! And these little droplet formations all through it. Like sporangia. Damn if it doesn't look like some incredible mold mycelium."

"Road-eating mold?"

"What can I say? There's a mold that eats creosote, I've heard . . ."

"Let's keep going," They drove on, without music. Only occasionally could they see its faint flash, but the frosty noise of it was continuous, though it wove easily into the susurration of a moving car. And didn't it intensify noticeably as they dropped more trafficked streets into Santa Rosa? They tried to see if other motorists were noticing it — and then they turned onto a broad westbound street that dropped through the center of town. Now the crush of it was louder still, its slight resistance to their tires grew palpable — and this asphalt laneway to the sinking sun was laddered with ghostly smears of rainbow no one could miss. Now cars flowing in both directions were carrying peo-

ple who were pointing out the roadway to each other. Ken swung north, and pulled in at Pap's Liquors on Mendocino Avenue.

Inside, with his twelve-packs and quart of Jack Daniels on the counter between them, Ken asked the woman at the register:

"What's with this stuff on the streets? Has it been like this all day?"

"You know, for the last hour or so, *everybody's* been asking that. I couldn't tell what the heck they were talking about at first. You can really see these, like, flashes of color off it now, can't you?" She mused on her view of the street, as though it were a picture in a travel brochure, or a telecast. "Oh dear!" she cried. "There's another one!"

"Another what?"

"Poor doggie! We saw one just a little while ago, and I asked this man was in here if it could be, you know, mad, but he said no, when they were mad they just foamed at the *mouth*. Oh dear!"

The dog, a mixed shepherd, flinched away and cantered down the sidewalk when Dale, newly amazed, went out and tried to coax the animal to hand. It was as if the dog felt some particular humiliation in its affliction — to have its all-questioning nose so strangely furred with a grayish thistle-down that it could neither sneeze nor rub away.

Driving back up Redwood, Ken said, "I know it's got our attention



now and all, but I'd swear it wasn't this thick an hour ago. We'd have heard it through the music."

"Park right where you were, Ken-ny. There was something I saw under your tail pipe."

This proved to be a patch of markedly thicker and taller road-growth. "When you first came over, you idled here a little before killing your engine."

"I was listening to the last part of a cut."

Dale nodded. "So . . . diffusion by automotive exhaust?" Both men gazed up and down the roadway. "I'm going to make some phone calls," Dale said, "and I think I won't be the only one doing it."

"Good idea. I'll wash us out a couple of glasses."

#### IV

**T**ed Fennerman sat at his desk, his chair clicked back at its rest angle. From his window he looked across his lot, the enameled candy colors of mint-new car tops, at the sky. Its dusky blue was turning purple as gradually as Ted imagined wine must ripen in a vat, or whatever they made wine in.

When business had been good, this was always an hour Ted savored, like a liqueur sipped privately. He watched the arc of 101 that wrapped the south end of his lot, watched the

dinner-bound traffic's headlights coming on like stars. He pictured, individually, the day's sales, each shepherded singly from his corral of glossy stock, and frisking with their new owners out to graze on 101's long pasture and raise the happy roar of their vitality.

Not so this evening, though business had been very good. Tonight, bone-weary and naggingly sore of throat, he couldn't taste the tang of it all. He'd told his secretary hours ago that he was out to calls; it seemed such an effort just to talk. He'd sat and fought his way through desk work, but at last ground to a halt. Lines of text had grown vague and slippery like snowed-under road; his pen lurched with a balky clutch, or lost it on the curves.

What kind of wimp was he? he asked himself bitterly. A simple god-damned sore throat, and bam — he was belly-up on the canvas. It was galling to feel too weak to strike when the iron was so hot. He had promised himself that he would go in on that new franchise with Clark Mannheim if things stayed even half as good as they'd actually been going. Clark wasn't going to stand around waiting to be kissed forever — he'd find someone else. Ted thought of all those TV ads where tired businessmen bungled big deals for lack of the right antihistamine-and-aspirin compound — dumb, though there was a grain of truth. You feel just a little off your

feed, and it could cost you some important moment.

Ted shook himself groggily, to wake his will. He snapped his chair up to its no-nonsense angle. He breathed deeply and punched Clark's number. When the receiver clicked open, he again drew breath for a hearty greeting. Clark's voice said: "Yes?"

"Gullub!" Ted boomed. "Glarg?"

"What? Who is this?"

Ted, as shocked as Clark sounded, gaped at the phone. He clapped it back to his head and cried: "Glarg!? Gellub?!" Now fear raked his heart. He slammed the phone down, jumped up. Clicking on his washroom light, he saw his mouth loom gaping up to the mirror over the sink, as if to devour it. An eerie, pale fur thronged his throat and flourished from his gums. He moaned, watching his shaggy tongue shudder in its weedy pit, like some hibernating monster tormented by a dream. Ted Fennerman headed for the hospital without further attempts on the phone.

When Gail, after waiting through half an hour and two piña coladas at a table at the Cattleman's, called the lot, she learned Ted had left long before without a word to anyone. So she went back and ordered her sirloin and a third colada — a double.

The drink seemed spiritless, but it did soothe a touch of soreness in her throat — Ted's bug no doubt — and help numb a general itchiness that

had persisted since the sauna. See the cycle? she asked herself. Get hung over, get lowered resistance, get sick, and then you wind up having more cocktails for relief. But she couldn't seem to care, and ordered another double when the steak came.

The restaurant seemed to promote her lassitude. Usually thronged, it was rather empty tonight; and in spite of this, it was short-staffed, too — her waitress had apologized in advance, saying they were not only lacking table help, but were short on cooks, too. Gail ate. Even with plenty of horseradish, the steak entertained her dulled palate only mildly. She finished it, though well before the last bite, she was beginning to feel almost drugged, as though she had ingested an anchor that tried to drag her head after it as it sank.

To hell with her thoughtless bastard of a husband. He'd forgotten her, gone home, was already resting. Thanks to him, she'd been stranded here to overeat and overdrink, but she'd waste no more time waiting on him. She'd get home and get off her feet. Slowly but decisively, Gail wiped her lips, rose, and walked out.

She stood in the parking lot. Out on Montgomery the midevening traffic looked pretty heavy. Did it sound extra screechy? More brakes and horns than usual? There! That tow truck nearly piled into that station wagon there at the light. She'd have to be very careful driving home.

"Mrs. Fennerman!" It was her waitress. The girl looked worried as well as tired. She seemed to stare a bit at Gail's face as she said: "You forgot your coat. And the check . . .?"

"Oh dear! I'm sorry! I feel so *woozy* tonight . . ." The girl *was* looking at her face, strangely, as they went back inside. Gail smiled self-deprecatingly at the cashier as she extended the woman her credit card. The cashier gasped, and Gail, seeing what made her do so, felt her head wobble at the shock as though lightly punched: her own forearm and hand, all silkily befurred with an exquisite lawn of pallid fine filaments a quarter inch long, like freshest, tenderest shoots of spring.

## V

**T**he windows, long gray with dawn, were turning buttery with sunrise. "Jesus Christ!" Ken said, keying down the newscast's volume. He and Ken sat in a kind of information trance, stunned by nightlong revelations. "I feel like a kid," Ken said. "After a three-flick matinee, paralyzed by a sugar whiteout, my brain gorged with weird images, coming out into an afternoon sun so bright it hurts. I knew — I *knew* I should've stocked up better yesterday. I mentioned it, right? And now, God rot me, I've got to drive into town before it's too late — before it's *three* inches deep."

Dale shook his head and gestured at the screen. "Didn't you see how traffic's starting to slip and slide?"

"It still looks steerable to me. There won't be much traffic on Redwood. It's now or never."

"Well, if you break down, stay off the road walking back. And get some food. Something in cans, and eatable cold. Chili or stew."

Ken rose, scattering empty beer cans, loath to be reminded of the fungus's capacity for rooting in flesh. Shutting the door after him, he looked with hate at the drive, where the fungal mat was now a lush two inches deep. He did a lumbering ballet across it, his soles cringing from the contact, and hauled himself into the Maverick. He feared his ill-tuned engine stalling, so he idled till it was good and warm. It mortified him that in doing this, he was feeding his world's new enemy, helplessly stoking the biological conflagration that had somehow, overnight, embraced it. The suspicion nagged him that this would be just how evolution's fall-guys, the adaptively overtaken breeds, always exited the stage; by a droll, inadvertent suicide, mechanically revving up their long-sacred tricks of survival that the upstart, by some dire new ingenuity, has turn to death traps. He gunned onto Old Redwood Highway's long mycelial lawn.

It was supple. Its slick toughness made the curves tricky. At least he was rolling — his tires could have

been fused with the road. It had happened to thousands of vehicles left parked overnight on heavily trafficked urban streets, which had been superabundantly seeded with exhaust-borne spores. This lush crop's greedy upreach was answered by the germination of a second form of spore, the strictly wind-borne kind produced by the road surface growth, and with which the treads of *all* cars that had been driven the day before were packed. By the time, two hours ago, the earliest commuters stepped out to their mounts, many found them crouched on crumbling flats that were already half digested by this devil grass growing from beneath and within. Ken, at some risk, stayed near forty, knowing his own venerable retreads must already be dying from within.

Maneuver proved little worse than on a slushy, half-snowed road, but in fact — wasn't the fungus beginning to look *wet* here and there? What was this, some new wrinkle? Should he call it in? The thought, an instant later, forced a laugh from him. Oh yes, report it! Add his jot of awe and stupefaction to the general delirium! Since TV's Tribal Eye first squinted at the streets on last night's six o'clock news, and blinking anchormen — raising uncertain voices above the rush-hour roar — had affirmed the infestation, the municipal, technical, and military sectors of the area had been caucusing with state authori-

ties. They had clashed and conferred throughout the night, all consensus eluding them. Information-pooling switchboards were quickly formed and publicized, and the data for a sketchy etiology of the ecoplague were soon gathered. But as long as continued observation showed the roads to be drivable, all involved willingly shunned the contemplation of their clearest countermeasure — the interdiction of all public thoroughfares. So vast an arrest of circulation, assuming it could even be brought off, seemed itself a cataclysm, a mortal shock that must produce unguessed-at mayhem among the bottled masses. They flooded the media with advisories, put troops and cops on alert, and waited. And with the dawn, people started trooping out to their usual commutes, also waiting to see what would happen. As though the simple wonder of the thing had universally captured people's curiosity, the sheer scope and unity of it. A fungus, stunningly proliferative, that thrived on hydrocarbons of every kind.

Gasoline and some municipal supplies of natural gas were thought to be its initial vector, at least in California and others of the heaviest-hit states. The mechanisms of its continuing diffusion were no mystery. The fungus's omni-peripheral advance, by mycelial branching, was incredibly rapid in itself, of course, through any food matrix. But with the combustion

of that matrix, the mycelium it contained underwent a fusion and a heat-triggered concentration of genetic material, and resolved itself into a gust of exceedingly small and numerous spores. Hence the roadways were only the first of many zones that those first vectors had seeded, since most of a tail pipe's tillage went aloft to haunt the troposphere. *There* was the real scope of this thing, and it made Ken shiver slightly, imagining that global microsnow, that sooty seed like a gauze-fine, wide-flung shroud settling right now — softly, softly — down upon them all. What could anybody do but drive out to business as usual through this awesome newness that had been laid upon the world?

At the liquor store he called the hot line on the pay phone. The wet spots on the mold weren't news to the tired-sounding woman he got. "Enzyme puddles, they think," she said bleakly. "Stay off the roads, especially the freeways."

"Yeah," said Ken, who could hear 101's roar a quarter mile from where he stood. He went in and got two cans of stew, two twelve-packs of Buckhorn, and a half gallon of Jim Beam. Reapproaching his car, he saw two black smears matching his tires' path, and seeming to melt into the mold even as he watched. Further provisionings must surely be made afoot, and the imbalance of his supplies bothered him. He went back in

and got another half gallon of Beam.

He drove fast, as the few other cars on Redwood were doing, slewing and screeching. His tires were spongy now, taunting him with collapse. He rolled past vineyard and pasture, trailer parks and sprawled junkyarded country houses. Fine fungal lawns toupeed all asphalt-shingled roofs — white lawns where antennas stood like stark, futuristic trees. Furred garden hoses lay in yards like feathered snakes in the grass. The pallid fuzz outlining window frames baffled him till he realized the monomers composing most caulks were hydrocarbons. On one porch he saw a shuddering puffball shape — just discernibly a dog, on its back, fighting to breathe, its paws kneading the air. Ken's rear left tire gasped, and sagged, and started jouncing. He braked, the brakes locked, the Maverick came ass-around, crossed the shoulder, dropped its rear in a rain ditch, and blew the tire on the right.

Raging, he got out hugging his bag, hotfooted across the sporulating mat, and jumped the ditch. He landed ankle-deep in sweet, sane, earthly grass — and partly in a cowpat. He roared some nouns and gerundives, found and flung an illogical rock at his car, whose front left tire sank with a wet cough. Ken broke out a beer and strode north, hurrying not to hear the last tire go. He stooped through the wire and straddled the wooden fences, and tiptoed the high-

way only where berry-choked streams compelled it. The space he moved through now was that magnified space into which everyone emerges from a failed car — full-scale space, toilsome and time-swallowing, where to reap one aim or object, you had to plow across acres of hours. "I should've stocked up better," Ken muttered. He shifted his burden and cursed the weight of the stew.

Dale was where he had left him, but sitting straighter, rapt in the newscast again. "Enzyme slicks, Ken-ny! Like a sudden digestive *assault*. What is it, near nine? Look there!"

"Man! That's 101 north of Novato?"

"Yup! Just where the southbound backup always starts — and I think its being rush hour's saved a lot of lives. From there on down, no one was going very fast when the fungus came on."

They watched an aerial view of confluent freeways where, at this hour, San Francisco-bound traffic routinely braked to join a creeping clog twenty miles long. Today the free-flowing traffic had come up on the clog at lower than usual speeds, though generally drivers had managed to maintain a cautious, coping flow over this invader of their path. They came in slower, but the enzymatic sweat was brutally sudden in its increase, and their tires had turned greasy in their swift liquefaction. Brakes jammed fruitlessly. With seem-

ing abandon — some with fey, balletic half turns — cars skied into the phalanxed bumpers of the idling backup.

Now the clog sat unmoving on twenty miles of flats, smoke penciling up here and there from the rivered vehicular jigsaw. South of the crazed skewing of the pileup zone, the jumbling of the derelict armada was less severe, though everywhere were sideways chromeboats with crumpled corners, ram-welded pairs of tailgating muscle-cars, and jackknifed semis pillowed on luckless imports. Diced safety glass, like a sugar spill, everywhere jeweled the prickly vigor, the pubic wetness of the mold.

The network's helicopter caught four others in its scan, two winching up wounded. The anchorman's voice-over announced his own craft's return south to base to be refurbished for rescue work. Thereafter, his shakily improvised script tended to relapse to a formula, an awed dirge: "And of course here we're seeing 101 as it approaches San Rafael . . . And this of course is 101 climbing past Marin . . ." Already most of the vehicles were abandoned, while the people in their tens of thousands, in four streams choppy with contrariety, trudged along both sides of the freeway's two corridors, as clotted in this progress as they had been in their cars. As an image, Ken found it very moving. As if he viewed an epochal event — mankind at last abjuring

some vast, ambiguous enterprise, a millennial pilgrimage frozen in its tracks by a cataclysmic unison of doubt, and abandoned at long last, all dismounting, all returning their myriad of separate ways. Their sun-blazoned fleet, while it roared, had seemed aimed, an army. It looked now like an aborted stampede.

"The shine of it! Christ!" Dale almost enthused. "It's almost *puddled* with enzymes."

"Tell me about it. Did you hear my car pull in? It's ass-in-a-ditch two miles back on four flats. Have a beer."

"And food?"

"In the bag. You know I just can't buy it, any kind of Russki gene-engineering angle. Why conquer a place so you can't get around in it once it's yours? They'd make something that went for the people primarily."

"This stuff doesn't do so bad on people," Dale said from the kitchen, plying a can opener.

"Yeah, but you've got to practically gargle or smoke spores to get it going."

Dale found a fork and came back to his chair. "It's not Russki, of course. It's off-world, obviously." He began gobbling stew. Ken nodded readily, but found he had to clear his throat.

"Right. Designed by another environment. And damn if I can imagine what kind of setup could produce . . . *this*."

Dale sat forking, musing. His fork-

ing slowed a beat or two, and he interlarded it with conjectures. "Biologically hot world? Teeming? Epochs of floral/faunal explosion. Organic sumps capped. With limestone by shallow seas, like here? Vast petrochemical deposits, in any case. But lots of venting to the surface. By vulcanism? Other seismic events? So plenty of tar pools, asphalt seeps, burning vents of natural gas." Dale forked up the last muddy lump, dropped his fork in the empty can, belched, and sighed. Ken, though bleakly, had to laugh.

"Somehow, I see *you*, Dale. A titanothero of that alien Tertiary, shuffling to a flaming tar pit, munching the sludge."

"The flaming vents," added Dale composedly, "would promote the evolution of combustive sporulation, of course."

It sobered them a moment, this naming of that most frightening fungal trick. The ragged carbon microshells that their seemingly destructive birth created for the spores made them infinitely responsive to air currents, amazingly invasive and adherent once in contact with a food matrix. Was there even now a just perceptible tickle of their fall through the air? They sat feeling the noise and stir of this new day rising around them, the unimaginable nationwide disorders, the dinosaurian bawl of mired commerce, of eighteen-wheel giants who lay half devoured by the very paths they trod.

Near the close of that same day, Sheri Klugman, Gail Fennerman's younger sister, blinked away tears, turning her face for a moment to the windows and the honey-and-roses light of dusk. Roy Hummer sat with his eyes commiserately downcast. He was experienced in the resurgences of grief his clients suffered in these interviews, but he was also exceedingly tired. This was his twelfth transaction since noon — all twelve of them involving loved ones in the Fennermans' condition.

"I'm sorry," Sheri said, resettling with a sigh the burden of composure on her shoulders. "It's just this awful *suddenness* of everything . . ."

"Please. You have our entire sympathy. And I know it's a terrible added burden, this time limit for disposal — *disposition* of your loved ones."

"Yes . . . well, I guess it's lucky that we live close enough to attend . . . Midnight tonight does feel so . . . *hurried*, though."

"Yes, of course, we're terribly sorry." Watch that tone of voice, Roy told himself. "It's certainly never been *our* way of doing things, this tactless hurry. But you can see that from a *sani* — a *medical* viewpoint . . .?"

Grief resurged in Sheri, overflowing as plaintiveness. "Do you really think that an open-casket ceremony isn't . . .?"

"No, that's quite definite, I'm afraid." Roy paused, and warned himself again. "You see, with this thing there's just nothing we can do. It's too tough to be, ah, shaved off. Even if it could be, there is a considerable, an extensive amount of *sbriveling*, frankly — do you follow me?" He saw that Sheri, with the inattentiveness of sorrow, was looking out the window again. Roy felt frayed and gritty. He wanted a shower. He wanted to sleep. Sheri's eyes were full again. The woman was plainly dazed, powerless to leave alone the few futilities remaining of her sister. With the helpless iteration of bereavement, she said:

"They were just both so *definite* — whenever it came up, I mean, about both wanting to be cremated—"

"No way," Roy Hummer snapped. "That's all there is to it. We're respecting the emergency ordinance 100 percent. So please just take it or leave it, Miss Klugman."

## VII

Screw the whole effort. Why struggle?" Ken asked, though he didn't stop working. It was the following afternoon. He was encasing his shoe and ankle in an aluminum foil bootie, crinkling it on sheet by sheet, securing it round the ankle with rubber bands. Dale already had his booties on. He tossed Ken a paper particle mask and stowed others, left over



from his remodeling, into one of the two knapsacks lying readied on the counter.

"Hunger and thirst," he answered. "Curiosity."

"Boy. Look at that, Dale," The TV's copter-borne eye scanned down over an oil tanker docked at Long Beach. The voice-over was saying: "As you can see, the fittings of those off-load hoses are densely covered with the mold, and as I say, the samples from what's still in the tanker as well as what's now in the onshore tanks have both tested positive for infestation. You can see, too, how these pipelines to the holding tanks in the hills are also covered. Officials have told us that this is merely a surface growth on a bituminous cover that's put on all gas pipeline to protect it from corrosion and weathering . . ."

"Christ!" Dale said. "What's it matter? That tanker was half off-loaded before they stopped! Three-quarters of a million barrels!"

"Know what they said last night, while you were asleep?" Ken asked, booting his other foot. "Seems they inject natural gas into the ground — to force up the pressure of crude they're pumping? So it turns out a lot of this natural gas also tests positive for infestation."

"Hoo boy," Dale said quietly. The newsman was now narrating a flyby of one of the Long Beach refineries. It belonged, he said, to one of the first of the big oil companies to comply

with the federal immediate-shutdown order, acting within twenty-four scant hours of receiving it. The furnaces beneath, and burn-off pipes above; its fractionating towers had been quenched for several hours now. Every valve and juncture in its python's nest of pipes was muffed with mold. Gaskets everywhere — however thick, sandwiched at whatever pressures — were digested to monomers to feed the alien biopolymer, and wherever gas drizzled in result, the mycelium grew in ghastly whiskers, along the undersides of pipe, in streamers trailing down to puddles, like moss dusting every secret little creek of leakage woven through the installation. And of course, as the hills and graded bluffs the storage tanks stood on were all capped with asphalt, the whole plant was environed with sweeping pastures of the pale predator.

"Think of it, Kenny." Dale still sounded subdued. "Those burn-off pipes just shut off this morning. Giant spore nozzles, pumping the atmosphere full like it was just another giant tank."

The voice-over, having discoursed on gaskets, was saying: "Chuck, I think, was pointing out earlier that here in L.A., the inversion layer has made airborne infestation of petroleum products in general an especially severe problem. Crated TVs still in the factory warehouses have been opened, and the insulation of their wiring found infested. And that, in

fact, is why we're going to have this intermission in our telecopter report, because we're very concerned to have our copter return to base for regular checks of the fuel line. That's why you see us turning around right now, and what's why it's back to you now, Chuck."

The studio anchorman appeared, conjured by his name. "Right, Dave, and thank you. And you'll be back on the air about noon for continued coverage of the Long Beach area?"

"That's right, Chuck. I. . . Ah, it seems I'll have to sign off a little quicker than. . . the pilot says we have a sudden loss of fuel pressure that — MY GOD, THE ENGINE'S STOPPED!"

The studio men had cut back to the copter's video transmission, but the camera, being aimed out the copter's windshield, was half eclipsed by Dave's panicked profile. Some movement of the man's terror had killed the sound. He turned a blind stare, mouth moving, to the camera, then back to the view before them all. This now tilted and — shockingly — rushed upward.

The studio, with quick cannibalism, cut in the video from a second copter, clearly fleeing the scene as it recorded Dave's craft smashing to fire against the mossy, gas-rilled grounds. Smoke welled up. Flame bloomed, branched and probed root-like through the jungled steel, and then the fleeing copter cut transmis-

sion and the studio anchor team was back on screen, so stunned that Chuck actually gave an astonished laugh. "That really happened!" he said. "I mean . . ."

Dale and Ken put on their packs, but stood waiting till a ground crew cut in transmission from a hilltop a mile from the refinery. There was a raving note in the reporter's voice left from the fury he had just seen. He told of the storage tanks' explosion moments before. The pair watched the black upward avalanche, the new hosts of spores storming up to mingle with their fellows under the inversion layer. Ken cracked the last beer, made room in it for bourbon, and spiked it. "So let's go," he said.

They left the TV on — an irrational, magical measure against its failure with the inevitable loss of electrical insulation — but there was relief in the firmness with which Dale shut and locked the door on its global window. They now marched — resolute, if shaky — into their local piece of the catastrophe, a share that seemed more manageable. The day was cloudless. Golden light waxed the blackish branches of the oaks and drenched the fields flanking Old Redwood Highway, while through these fields a fair number of folk trudged, townward or back. Dividing them, the translucent luxuriance of the roadway was riverlike, something that made the people on either side more separate than could the gap alone.

They all walked through a country silence never known here with the freeway running so near. They looked rather dwarfed — in their unshelled littleness — by the green acres they had always zipped past. They traded calls here and there, in voices also dwarfed by the big, breeze-whispery trees. Many of them wore bandannas like silent-Western stickup man, and some wore masks like Ken and Dale's.

Both, as they walked in their bright-booted guise, felt a touch of unmeant circus gaiety in the spectacle. Now dozens of cars, mired within a half hour of Ken's mishap, were derelict on the ermined asphalt—whimsically angled, or half in ditches, or squared off in the disarray of impact. All were richly bearded on their greased underbellies; the interiors of most, those with plastic upholstery, were lavishly robed. There was something of Mardi Gras in the long, disjointed rumba line of them.

"Floats in the Fungus Bowl Parade," Ken said. "Aborted due to lack of tires." The flanking power lines with their tufted insulation suggested streamers, while a service station just ahead offered racks of furry tires, like festively frosted doughnuts. Dale gave a laugh that was half a groan.

"I tell you, Kenny, we're doomed! Look at those sporangia. I mean, as if the combustive spores aren't enough, we're getting this incredible ground crop in just three days! I mean, this stuff is *fast*. We either hit the bush,

head for the unpaved hills, or we've had it. And you know, all the time it keeps nagging at me: how the hell did this stuff *get* here? I mean, did it just blow across space?"

"How the hell do I know? Here." Ken took the bottle from his pack and tilted some bourbon in under his mask, and Dale followed suit. "Once we pick up some more beers at Larkfield, we'll both feel better," Ken advised.

There was a crowd at Larkfield, and beer's price had gone up sharply. They proceeded with three more twelve-packs, Ken grumbling. They gingerfooted on their silver feet through the shopping center — all paved — and across Mark West Road. After that there were fields to walk on again. Lifting their masks often to swallow beer, they climbed the highway's gradual rise to an overview of 101, which swept near at this point, just above town.

The freeway's curve, the outward surge of it, acted as their TV had done, brought home afresh the continental scope of this plague, the wheels of trade and travel locked in this hoarfrost coast to coast. They paused to ply the bourbon, hundreds of captured vehicles visible from here. All the sunlight, and the beauteous diffractions of the sporangia, made them seem numinous things, crude Elder Gods overtaken by an exuberant cosmos of simpler, more vigorous beings: a tow truck, its oily boom so

bearded it seemed some exotic sail-backed being; a toppled bus like a giant bug cocooned or spider-shrouded—

"Hey. Look there," Ken said. "That Rolls behind the bus? It's *idling*. Christ, you'd think the jackass could've—"

"No, there's a guy there that just leaned in and started it up! Look, there he is, moving up to that green van, see?"

"Jesus Christ! That's Al! Guy that works in a gas station up the road. What the hell's he *doing*?"

Al's awkwardness and odd hesitations of three days ago were gone. He was a man of experience now. He grasped the van's door handle as surely as its owner might. The van yielded what he sought — the keys — for he geared it to neutral, fired it up, warmed it, and then left it idling on what remained to it of fuel.

Al surveyed the way he had come, and then the way he was headed. He looked up at the sun and seemed to come to a decision. He sat down on the step-up of a big semi's cab. He settled back with an odd completeness, so the step well and door received and propped him fully. Then he opened his shirt. Dividing his chest

and stomach was a vertical red scar. Al grasped the flaps of this seam as briskly as he had his shirt, and spread open a slick chasm from which a multilegged blackness, about a small dog's size, came nimbling down across his lap, and sprang thence to the fungal lawn. The hands that freed it fell slack as its last leg was plucked from the incision.

The thing was glossy and quick. There was much of the insect about its structure, about its scissoring, multiple mouthparts, with which it now began to gorge on the sporangia that sparkled everywhere around its stilted legs. It wandered out to graze the jeweled laneway, while slump-headed Al stared empty-eyed.

"Ah yes," Dale said in a slow, strange voice. "A biologically hot world indeed. Full of remarkable forms. You know what, Kenny? See the pickup in that guy's driveway over there? See the gun racks? Let's go borrow a rifle, or bring him over here."

"There must be thousands of them, man. All over."

"Yeah. But we can *get* this one."

This seemed to waken Ken a bit. "Right on," he said.



## THE RELATIVITY OF WRONG

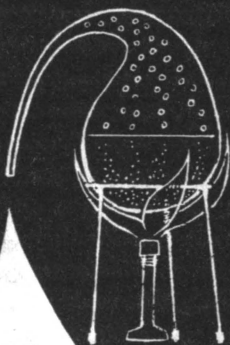
I received a letter from a reader the other day. It was hand-written in crabbed penmanship so that it was very difficult to read. Nevertheless, I tried to make it out just in case it might prove to be important.

In the first sentence, he told me he was majoring in English Literature but felt he needed to teach me science. (I sighed a bit, for I knew very few English Lit majors who are equipped to teach me science, but I am very aware of the vast state of my ignorance, and I am prepared to learn as much as I can from anyone, however low in the social scale, so I read on.)

It seemed that in one of my innumerable essays, here and elsewhere, I had expressed a certain gladness at living in a century in which we finally got the basis of the Universe straight.

I didn't go into detail in the matter, but what I meant was that we now know the basic rules governing the Universe, together with the gravitational interrelationships of its gross components, as shown in the theory of relativity worked out between 1905 and 1916. We also know the basic rules governing the subatomic particles and their interrelationships, since these are very neatly described by the quantum theory worked out between 1900 and 1930. What's more, we have found that the galaxies and clus-

# Science



## ISAAC ASIMOV

ters of galaxies are the basic units of the physical Universe, as discovered between 1920 and 1930.

These are all twentieth century discoveries, you see.

The young specialist in English Lit, having quoted me, went on to lecture me severely on the fact that in *every* century, people have thought they understood the Universe at last, and in *every* century they proved to be wrong. It follows that the one thing we can say about our modern “knowledge” is that it is *wrong*.

The young man then quoted with approval what Socrates had said on learning that the Delphic oracle had proclaimed him the wisest man in Greece. “If I am the wisest man,” said Socrates, “it is because I alone know that I know nothing.” The implication was that I was very foolish because I was under the impression I knew a great deal.

Alas, none of this was new to me. (There is very little that is new to me; I wish my correspondents would realize this.) This particular thesis was addressed to me a quarter of a century ago by John Campbell, who specialized in irritating me. He also told me that all theories are proven wrong in time.

My answer to him was, “John, when people thought the earth was flat, they were wrong. When people thought the earth was spherical, they were wrong. But if *you* think that thinking the earth is spherical is *just as wrong* as thinking the earth is flat, then your view is wronger than both of them put together.”

The basic trouble, you see, is that people think that “right” and “wrong” are absolute, that everything that isn’t perfectly and completely right is totally and equally wrong.

However, I don’t think that’s so. It seems to me that right and wrong are fuzzy concepts, and I will devote this essay to an explanation of why I think so.

First, let me dispose of Socrates because I am sick and tired of this pretense that knowing you know nothing is a mark of wisdom.

No one knows *nothing*. In a matter of days, babies learn to recognize their mothers.

Socrates would agree, of course, and explain that knowledge of trivia is not what he means. He means that in the great abstractions over which human beings debate, one should start without preconceived, unexamined notions, and that he alone knew this. (What an enormously arrogant claim!)

In his discussions of such matters as "What is justice?" or "What is virtue?" he took the attitude that he knew nothing and had to be instructed by others. (This is called "Socratic irony," for Socrates knew very well that he knew a great deal more than the poor souls he was picking on.) By pretending ignorance, Socrates lured others into propounding their views on such abstractions. Socrates, then, by a series of ignorant-sounding questions, forced the others into such a melange of self-contradictions that they would finally break down and admit they didn't know what they were talking about.

It is the mark of the marvelous toleration of the Athenians that they let this continue for decades and that it wasn't till Socrates turned seventy, that they broke down and forced him to drink poison.

Now where do we get the notion that "right" and "wrong" are absolutes? It seems to me that this arises in the early grades, when children who know very little are taught by teachers who know very little more.

Young children learn spelling and arithmetic, for instance, and here we tumble into apparent absolutes.

How do you spell sugar? Answer: s-u-g-a-r. That is *right*. Anything else is *wrong*.

How much is  $2 + 2$ ? The answer is 4. That is *right*. Anything else is *wrong*.

Having exact answers, and having absolute rights and wrongs, minimizes the necessity of thinking, and that pleases both students and teachers. For that reason, students and teachers alike prefer short answer tests to essay tests; multiple choice over blank short answer tests; and true-false tests over multiple choice.

But short answer tests are, to my way of thinking, useless as a measure of the student's understanding of a subject. They are merely a test of the efficiency of his ability to memorize.

You can see what I mean as soon as you admit that right and wrong are relative.

How do you spell "sugar"? Suppose Alice spells it p-q-z-z-f and Genevieve spells it s-h-u-g-e-r. Both are wrong, but is there any doubt that Alice is wronger than Genevieve? For that matter, I think it is possible to argue that Genevieve's spelling is superior to the "right" one.

Or suppose you spell "sugar": s-u-c-r-o-s-e, or  $C_{12}H_{22}O_{11}$ . Strictly speaking, you are wrong each time, but you're displaying a certain

knowledge of the subject beyond conventional spelling.

Suppose, then, the test question was: How many different ways can you spell "sugar"? Justify each.

Naturally, the student would have to do a lot of thinking and, in the end, exhibit how much or how little he knows. The teacher would also have to do a lot of thinking in the attempt to evaluate how much or how little the student knows. Both, I imagine, would be outraged.

Again, how much is  $2 + 2$ ? Suppose Joseph says:  $2 + 2 = \text{purple}$ , while Maxwell says:  $2 + 2 = 17$ . Both are wrong, but isn't it fair to say that Joseph is wronger than Maxwell?

Suppose you said:  $2 + 2 = \text{an integer}$ . You'd be right, wouldn't you? Or suppose you said:  $2 + 2 = \text{an even integer}$ . You'd be rather righter. Or suppose you said:  $2 + 2 = 3.999$ . Wouldn't you be *nearly* right?

If the teacher wants 4 for an answer and won't distinguish between the various wrongs, doesn't that set an unnecessary limit to understanding?

Suppose the question is, how much is  $9 + 5$ , and you answer 2. Will you not be excoriated and held up to ridicule, and will you not be told that  $9 + 5 = 14$ ?

If you were then told that 9 hours had passed since midnight and it was therefore 9 o'clock, and were asked what time it would be in 5 more hours, and you answered 14 o'clock on the grounds that  $9 + 5 = 14$ , would you not be excoriated again, and told that it would be 2 o'clock? Apparently, in that case,  $9 + 5 = 2$  after all.

Or again suppose, Richard says:  $2 + 2 = 11$ , and before the teacher can send him home with a note to his mother, he adds, "To the base 3, of course." He'd be right.

Here's another example. The teacher asks: "Who is the 40th President of the United States?" and Barbara says, "There isn't any, teacher."

"Wrong!" says the teacher, "Ronald Reagan is the 40th President of the United States."

"Not at all," says Barbara, "I have here a list of all the men who have served as President of the United States under the Constitution, from George Washington to Ronald Reagan, and there are only 39 of them, so there is no 40th President."

"Ah," says the teacher, "but Grover Cleveland served two non-consecutive terms, one from 1885 to 1889, and the second from 1893 to 1897. He counts as both the 22nd and 24th President. That is why Ronald Reagan is the 39th person to serve as President of the United



States, and is, at the same time, the 40th President of the United States.”

Isn't that ridiculous? Why should a person counted twice if his terms are non-consecutive, and only once if he served two consecutive terms? Pure convention! Yet Barbara is marked wrong — just as wrong as if she had said the 40th President of the United States is Fidel Castro.

Therefore, when my friend the English Literature expert tells me that in every century, scientists think they have worked out the Universe and are *always wrong*, what I want to know is *how* wrong are they? Are they always wrong to the same degree? Let's take an example.

In the early days of civilization, the general feeling was that the Earth was flat.

This was not because people were stupid, or because they were intent on believing silly things. They felt it was flat on the basis of sound evidence. It was *not* just a matter of “That's how it looks,” because the Earth does *not* look flat. It looks chaotically bumpy, with hills, valleys, ravines, and so on.

Of course, there are plains where, over limited areas, the Earth's surface *does* look fairly flat. One of those plains is in the Tigris-Euphrates area where the first historical civilization (one with writing) developed, that of the Sumerians.

Perhaps it was the appearance of the plain that may have persuaded the clever Sumerians to accept the generalization that the Earth was flat; that if you somehow evened out all the elevations and depressions, you would be left with flatness. Contributing to the notion may have been the fact that stretches of water (ponds and lakes) looked pretty flat on quiet days.

Another way of looking at it is to ask, what is the “curvature” of Earth's surface? Over a considerable length, how much does the surface deviate (on the average) from perfect flatness? The flat-Earth theory would make it seem that the surface doesn't deviate from flatness at all, that its curvature is 0 to the mile.

Nowadays, of course, we are taught that the flat-earth theory is *wrong*; that it is all wrong, terribly wrong, absolutely. But it isn't. The curvature of the Earth is *nearly* 0 to the mile, so that although the flat-Earth theory is wrong, it happens to be *nearly* right. That's why the theory lasted so long.

There were reasons, to be sure, to find the flat-earth theory unsatisfactory; and, about 350 B.C., the Greek philosopher

Aristotle summarized them. First, certain stars disappeared beyond the southern hemisphere as one travelled north and beyond the northern hemisphere as one travelled south. Second, the Earth's shadow on the Moon during a lunar eclipse was always the arc of a circle. Third, here on Earth itself, ships disappeared beyond the horizon hull first in whatever direction they were travelling.

All three observations could not be reasonably explained if the Earth's surface were flat, but could be explained by assuming the Earth to be a sphere.

What's more, Aristotle believed that all solid matter tended to move toward a common center, and if solid matter did this, it would end up as a sphere. A given volume of matter is, on the average, closer to a common center if it is a sphere than if it is any other shape whatever.

About a century after Aristotle, the Greek philosopher Eratosthenes noted that the Sun cast a shadow of different lengths at different latitudes (all the shadows would be the same length if the Earth's surface were flat). From the difference in shadow lengths, he calculated the size of the Earthly sphere, and it turned out to be 25,000 miles in circumference.

The curvature of such a sphere is about 0.000012 miles to the mile, a quantity very close to 0 miles to the mile as you can see, and one not easily measured by the techniques at the disposal of the ancients. The tiny difference between 0 and 0.000012 accounts for the fact that it took so long to pass from the flat Earth to the spherical Earth.

Mind you, even a tiny difference, such as that between 0 and 0.000012 can be extremely important. That difference mounts up. The Earth cannot be mapped over large areas with any accuracy at all if the difference isn't taken into account and if the Earth isn't considered spherical rather than a flat surface. Long ocean voyages can't be undertaken with any reasonable way of locating one's own position in the ocean unless the Earth is considered spherical rather than flat.

Furthermore, the flat Earth presupposes the possibility of an infinite Earth, or of the existence of an "end" to the surface. The spherical Earth, however, postulates an Earth that is both endless and yet finite, and it is the latter postulate that is consistent with all later findings.

So although the flat-Earth theory is only slightly wrong and is a credit to its inventors, all things considered, it is wrong enough to be discarded in favor of the spherical-Earth theory.

And yet is the Earth a sphere?

No, it is *not* a sphere, not in the strict mathematical sense. A sphere has certain mathematical properties — for instance, all diameters (that is, all straight lines that pass from one point on its surface through the center to another point on its surface) have the same length.

That, however, is not true of the Earth. Various diameters of the Earth differ in length.

What gave people the notion the Earth wasn't a true sphere? To begin with, the Sun and Moon have outlines that are perfect circles within the limits of measurement in the early days of the telescope. This is consistent with the supposition that the Sun and Moon are perfectly spherical in shape.

However, when Jupiter and Saturn were observed by the first telescopic observers, it became quickly apparent that the outlines of those planets were not circles, but distinct ellipses. That meant that Jupiter and Saturn were not true spheres.

Isaac Newton, toward the end of the 17th Century, showed that a massive body would form a sphere under the pull of gravitational forces (exactly as Aristotle had argued), but only if it were not rotating. If it were rotating, a centrifugal effect would be set up which would lift the body's substance against gravity, and this effect would be greater the closer to the equator you progressed. The effect would also be greater the more rapidly a spherical object rotated, and Jupiter and Saturn rotated very rapidly indeed.

The Earth rotated much more slowly than Jupiter or Saturn so the effect should be smaller, but it should still be there. Actual measurements of the curvature of the Earth were carried out in the 18th Century and Newton was proved correct.

The Earth has an equatorial bulge, in other words. It is flattened at the poles. It is an "oblate spheroid" rather than a sphere. This means that the various diameters of the Earth differ in length. The longest diameters are any of those that stretch from one point on the equator to an opposite point on the equator. This "equatorial diameter" is 12,755 kilometers (7,927 miles). The shortest diameter is from the north pole to the south pole, and this "polar diameter" is 12,711 kilometers (7,900 miles).

The difference between the longest and shortest diameters is 44 kilometers (27 miles), and that means that the "oblateness" of the Earth (its departure from true sphericity) is  $44/12755$  or 0.0034. This amounts to 1/3 of 1 percent.

To put it another way, on a flat surface, curvature is 0 miles per mile everywhere. On Earth's spherical surface, curvature is 0.000012 miles per mile everywhere (or 8 inches per mile). On Earth's oblate spheroidal surface, the curvature varies from 7.973 inches to the mile to 8.027 inches to the mile.

The correction in going from spherical to oblate spheroidal is much smaller than going from flat to spherical. Therefore, although the notion of the Earth as sphere is wrong, strictly speaking, it is not *as* wrong as the notion of the Earth as flat.

Even the oblate-spheroidal notion of the Earth is wrong, strictly speaking. In 1958, when the satellite "Vanguard 1" was put into orbit about the Earth, it was able to measure the local gravitational pull of the Earth — and therefore its shape — with unprecedented precision. It turned out that the equatorial bulge south of the equator was slightly bulgier than the bulge north of the equator, and that the south pole sea-level was slightly nearer the center of the Earth than the north pole sea-level was.

There seemed no other way of describing this than by saying the Earth was "pear-shaped," and at once many people decided that the Earth was nothing like a sphere but was shaped like a Bartlett pear dangling in space. Actually, the pear-like deviation from oblate spheroid perfect was a matter of yards rather than miles, and the adjustment of curvature was in the millionths of inches per mile.

In short, my English Lit friend, living in a mental world of absolute rights and wrongs may be imagining that because all theories are *wrong*, the Earth may be thought spherical now, but cubical next century, and a hollow icosahedron the next, and a doughnut-shape the one after.

What actually happens is that once scientists get hold of a good concept they gradually refine and extend it with greater and greater subtlety as their instruments of measurement improve. Theories are not so much wrong as incomplete.

This can be pointed out in many other cases than just the shape of the Earth. Even when a new theory seems to represent a revolution, it usually arises out of small refinements. If something more than a small refinement were needed, then the old theory would never have endured.

Copernicus switched from an Earth-centered planetary system to a Sun-centered one. In doing so, he switched from something that was

obvious to something that was apparently ridiculous. However, it was a matter of finding better ways of calculating the motion of the planets in the sky and, eventually, the geocentric theory was just left behind. It was precisely because the old theory gave results that were fairly good by the measurement standards of the time that kept it in being so long.

Again, it is because the geological formations of the Earth change *so* slowly and the living things upon it evolve *so* slowly that it seemed reasonable at first to suppose that there was *no* change and that Earth and life always existed as they did today. If that were so, it made no difference whether Earth and life were billions of years old or thousands. Thousands were easier to grasp.

But when careful observation showed that Earth and life were changing at a rate that was very tiny but *not* zero, then it became clear that Earth and life had to be very old. Modern geology came into being, and so did the notion of biological evolution.

If the rate of change were more rapid, geology and evolution would have reached their modern state in ancient times. It is only because the difference between the rate of change in a static Universe and an evolutionary one is that between zero and very nearly zero that the creationists can continue propagating their folly.

Again, how about the two great theories of the twentieth century: relativity and quantum mechanics?

Newton's theories of motion and gravitation were very close to right, and they would have been absolutely right if only the speed of light were infinite. However, the speed of light is finite, and that had to be taken into account in Einstein's relativistic equations, which were an extension and refinement of Newton's equations.

You might say that the difference between infinite and finite is itself infinite, so why didn't Newton's equations fall to the ground at once? Let's put it another way and ask how long it takes light to travel over a distance of a meter.

If light travelled at infinite speed, it would take light 0 seconds to travel a meter. At the speed at which light actually travels, however, it takes it 0.0000000033 seconds. It is that difference between 0 and 0.0000000033 that Einstein corrected for.

Conceptually, the correction was as important as the the correction of Earth's curvature from 0 to 8 inches per mile was. Speeding subatomic particles wouldn't behave the way they do without the correction, nor would particle accelerators work the way they do, nor nuclear

bombs explode, nor the stars shine. Nevertheless, it was a tiny correction, and it is no wonder that Newton in his time could not allow for it, since he was limited in his observations to speeds and distances over which the correction was insignificant.

Again, where the pre-quantum view of physics fell short was that it didn't allow for the "graininess" of the Universe. All forms of energy had been thought to be continuous and to be capable of division into indefinitely smaller and smaller quantities.

This turned out to be not so. Energy comes in quanta, the size of which is dependent upon something called Planck's constant. If Planck's constant were equal to 0 erg-seconds, then energy would be continuous, and there would be no grain to the Universe. Planck's constant, however, is equal to 0.0000000000000000000000000066 erg-seconds. That is indeed a tiny deviation from zero, so tiny that ordinary questions of energy in every-day life need not concern themselves with it. When, however, you deal with subatomic particles, the graininess is sufficiently large in comparison to make it impossible to deal with them without taking quantum considerations into account.

Since the refinements in theory grow smaller and smaller, even quite ancient theories must have been sufficiently right to allow advances to be made, advances that were not wiped out by subsequent refinements.

The Greeks introduced the notion of latitude and longitude, for instance, and made reasonable maps of the Mediterranean basin even without taking sphericity into account, and we still use latitude and longitude today.

The Sumerians were probably the first to establish the principle that planetary movements in the sky exhibit regularity and can be predicted, and they proceeded to work out ways of doing so even though they assumed the Earth to be the center of the Universe. Their measurements have been enormously refined but the principle remains.

Newton's theory of gravitation, while incomplete over vast distances and enormous speeds, is perfectly suitable for the Solar system. Halley's Comet appears punctually as Newton's theory of gravitation and laws of motion predict. All of rocketry is based on Newton, and "Voyager II" reached Uranus within a second of the predicted time. None of these things were outlawed by relativity.

In the 19th Century, before quantum theory was dreamed of, the laws of thermodynamics were established, including the conservation

of energy as the first law, and the inevitable increase of entropy as the second law. Certain other conservation laws such as those of momentum, angular momentum, and electric charge were also established. So were Maxwell's laws of electromagnetism. All remained firmly entrenched even after quantum theory came in.

Naturally, the theories we now have might be considered wrong in the simplistic sense of my English Lit correspondent, but in a much truer and subtler sense, they need only be considered incomplete.

For instance, quantum theory has produced something called "quantum weirdness," which brings into serious question the very nature of reality and which produces philosophical conundrums that physicists simply can't seem to agree upon. It may be that we have reached a point where the human brain can no longer grasp matters, or it may be that quantum theory is incomplete and that once it is properly extended, all the "weirdness" will disappear.

Again, quantum theory and relativity seem to be independent of each other, so that while quantum theory makes it seem possible that three of the four known interactions can be combined into one mathematical system, gravitation — the realm of relativity — as yet seems intransigent.

If quantum theory and relativity can be combined, a true "unified field theory" may become possible.

If all this is done, however, it would be a still finer refinement that would affect the edges of the known — the nature of the big bang and the creation of the Universe, the properties at the center of black holes, some subtle points about the evolution of galaxies and supernovas, and so on.

Virtually all that we know today, however, would remain untouched and when I say I am glad that I live in a century when the Universe is essentially understood, I think I am justified.

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## Coming next month

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The November issue is on sale October 1.

*In which a Russian bureaucrat, on the Moscow-Leningrad overnight express, finds an empty compartment — and encounters a chilling surprise . . .*

# The Fellow Traveler

BY  
JOHN BRUNNER



He pulled well down on his balding head against a penetrating spring drizzle, coat tightly buttoned around his paunchy frame, Pavel Dmitrovich Prokudin paid off his taxi not in front of the station but on its west side, where one could walk straight to the platform without negotiating the milling throng around the booking offices. He had no need to buy a ticket; as an official of the state railway system, he was entitled to a permanent pass, and the secretary of an old and influential friend had confirmed a reservation for him on the phone. He was in a cheerful mood; his business in Moscow — with that same friend, Boris Ivanovich Vassilyev of the ministry — had gone well, and as a result he was free of the anxieties that had plagued him for the past couple of months.

He was a little later than he had

intended, though; it lacked barely ten minutes of 2300, the departure time of the Red Arrow, the Moscow-Leningrad overnight express.

He looked around for someone to carry his bags to the train, and realized with abrupt annoyance that the porters were all busy. Just ahead of where the taxi had set him down, two Ikarus buses were discharging a full complement of passengers, chivied along by Intourist couriers, while their luggage was being hastily loaded onto trolleys.

Despite the rain that misted his glasses, Prokudin knew exactly what he was looking at, for he had seen the same uncountable times. Here was some foreign tour group, or more likely a commercial or cultural delegation, which meant that the Krasnaya Strela would be full to capacity. He had told Boris's secretary to insist

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on a compartment to himself, but in these circumstances. . . .

Much put out, he gathered his belongings: suitcase in one hand; in the other, and under the other arm, bags and packages containing the fruits of a brief shopping expedition he had been able to make this afternoon. There was a present for his wife, of course, and another — considerably more expensive — for a young lady who worked as a script editor at Lenfilm; and even a present for himself, in the shape of two bottles of best-quality Georgian brandy; these he had not had to pay for. Carrying that lot was awkward, but he managed.

The delegation, he saw now, was composed of Africans: their faces all shades of brown and black, some of them wearing incongruous raincoats over loose pajamalike outfits that could offer little protection from the chill. How would they have managed had they arrived a month or two ago, when the western part of the country lay in the grip of its worst winter in seven years?

Still, it was spring now; the thaw had come, and with it a thaw in his own personal affairs. He was eager to get home and back to work.

Striding past the uncertain foreigners, he made his way to the fifth carriage. Its *provodnitsa*, fat and middle-aged in her dark uniform jacket and trousers, stood beside the doorway, engaged in heated conversation with the senior Intourist courier. They

were arguing over flapping sheets of paper, no doubt the list of passengers assigned to each compartment. Prokudin interrupted, showing his pass; having barely glanced at it, the conductress waved him by under the resentful gaze of the otherwise docile Africans, who were not merely cold but obviously very tired.

At this end of the corridor was located the boiler from which passengers could obtain hot water for tea. It had not yet been lighted, but half a dozen black men who had managed to board ahead of their companions were clustered hopefully around it. He pushed between them and continued toward the rear. The compartment he had specified was next but one to the lavatory, the best location; the endmost one was liable to be noisy in the middle of the night.

Its door was open. He turned to enter, and checked. On the left-hand bed lay a suitcase, a coat so wet with rain it should have been hung up, and a pair of gloves.

The last thing he wanted was to spend the night with a complete stranger who probably didn't speak a word of Russian, might have peculiar personal habits, and could scarcely be refused a share of the fine brandy with which he planned to have a private celebration on the way home.

Naturally, if his unexpected fellow traveler had been like the one Boris had had wished on him. . . . Granted, at his age he should have

known better, but one could scarcely blame the guy for taking advantage of such an opportunity. Even that pleasant surprise, though, had turned out to have drawbacks in the long run: a fact for which he, Prokudin, felt profoundly grateful.

Fuming, he set down his burdens on the other bed and marched back to have a word with the conductress. There was always a chance she could put the African elsewhere.

But she was still outside, and the argument was getting even louder. Apparently, owing to some bureaucratic mix-up, two of the couriers were going to have to be moved to a "hard" section of the train, where four passengers instead of two shared each compartment. It looked as though he was condemned to put up with things as they were.

By chance, though, as he turned back past the *provodnitsa's* tiny office opposite the water heater, his eye was caught by a form lying on the shelf that served for a desk. It was a standard compartment-assignment list, with two names entered against each number except the last. That space, he realized, did not contain names, but a comment scrawled in black pencil. The writing was atrocious, but he managed to decipher it. It said, "Door catch jammed. Previously reported."

Hmm! So the end compartment was in fact vacant! Well, it was worth a try. . . .

He hurried along the corridor again. From long experience he knew that, although the door catches did sometimes stick, they could usually be freed by a really determined attack. Sometimes, however, people were too afraid of damaging state property to use the necessary amount of force.

Grasping the handle of the sliding door, he braced one foot against the edge of the frame and gave a mighty tug.

The door opened with no resistance whatsoever.

So unexpectedly did it yield that he nearly lost his balance. Uttering an oath, minded to haul the conductress over the coals for inefficiency, he turned around, and saw that the last of the Africans was being urged aboard, it being now 2259.

On reflection, it would be better to file a report on arrival than risk the damned woman trying to order him back to his assigned bed. There was nothing wrong with the empty compartment, except that — he sniffed — the air was rather stale. The beds were both made up; the bedding might be a little damp, perhaps, but after a few slugs of brandy he wouldn't care about trifles like that. . . .

Any moment the African might return to the adjacent compartment. If he saw a Russian moving out, he might lodge a complaint about racial prejudice. Prokudin had no very high opinion of black people, but it was politic

to keep up a good front. For all he knew, his unwelcome companion might be a cabinet minister.

Hastily he transferred his belongings and pulled the door to exactly as the train jarred into motion.

Having hung up his hat, coat, jacket and tie, and stowed his glasses in their pocket case, he extracted towel and toilet bag from his suitcase and made for the adjacent washroom. It was not in the best of repair, but it looked as though he had first call on it; there were no water splashes on the floor, and there was even a decent supply of toilet paper. Just in case it ran out, he tucked a few sheets into his trouser pocket.

Refreshed, he returned to his compartment. To be on the safe side, he opened and closed the door a couple of times, finding that it moved as freely as before. Sitting down with both pillows behind him, he opened a pack of Bogatyr brand *papirosi*, old-style cigarettes with a built-in holder, which he smoked in the traditional manner, bending the cardboard tube halfway along and holding it between first and second fingers with his thumb pushing the end upward like a miniature pipe. Having lit the first, he took three slow, relishing mouthfuls of the brandy.

"Well, this is better, I must say!" he muttered to the air as the alcoholic warmth permeated his body. What could that fool of a *provodnitsa* be up to, claiming that the compartment

door was stuck? Was there perhaps something in here that ought not to be — something she was delivering for a friend, or for a price; for example, goods that had eluded import duty? If there were . . . !

The idea appealed to him, and he made a cursory search, but there was no sign of anything unusual.

He resumed his place, taking another swig of brandy and lighting another cigarette. More likely, come to think of it, the compartment had — past tense — held something illicit. Everyone knew that despite the efforts of the customs service, a certain amount of smuggling took place between Leningrad and, especially, Finnish ports, and the best prices were to be obtained in Moscow. Suppose the woman had pretended the door was faulty on a previous, southbound trip, and then had to maintain the pretense when nobody turned up to fit a new catch. Come to think of it — he blinked and glanced around — that wasn't so surprising. This carriage was no longer worth repairing; it was old stock, as was evidenced by the shabby condition of the lavatory. It, and those like it, were due to be taken out of service anytime now and dismissed to the scrapyard. Who should know better than himself, in charge of procurement and spares for this whole sector of the railway?

The more he thought about it, and the more brandy he put away, the more convinced he became that his

inspired guess must be correct. Maybe he should call for an official inquiry. Two days ago the mere mention of those words would have sent a shiver of apprehension down his spine, for he himself had been in line to face one, but that little problem had been taken care of by his call on Vassilyev. Obviously that latter had been hoping that the last had been heard about a recent, regrettable episode during, as it so happened, a night journey on this very train, particularly since the other party involved was no longer in a position to discuss the matter. Therefore he had been greatly put out by what Prokudin had to say. However, he owed his visitor several favors, and had perforce consented to make sure that the inquiry — which concerned certain spare parts that were not as new as the accompanying documents claimed, but had seen service before and merely been refurbished — would concentrate its attention on the lower levels of the railway hierarchy. Two or three obligatory scapegoats would be found, but the reputation of Pavel Dmitrovich Prokudin would remain untarnished, as befitted a Party member of nearly thirty years' standing.

Nonetheless, he could certainly do with something more positive to his credit, even if only as a diversionary maneuver, and finding a ticketless passenger concerned with the concealment of illegal goods in a supposedly inaccessible sleeping com-

partment. . . . Yes, something of that kind would do very nicely. And if a silly, fat old woman got into trouble, so what? It was no skin off his nose, was it?

Shortly, however, all such thoughts were driven away by others far more enjoyable. What a good idea it had been to make sure that the reservation lists relating to the night of Boris's unfortunate escapade "got lost"! Naturally, as he had been at pains to make clear in Moscow, at the time he had been thinking solely in terms of doing a good turn to an old pal who risked getting into hot water. Of course, the possibility had to be borne in mind that they might just conceivably turn up again. . . .

But they wouldn't. Not so long as Boris kept his part of the bargain.

Chuckling at his own ingenuity, Prokudin lit another cigarette and swigged more brandy. After that the bottle was only two-thirds full.

Lights had been flashing past the window as the train rolled through the city's northern suburbs. By now, however, it had entered open country, and there was nothing to be seen but darkness. The snow that had lain so long and deep during the winter had completely melted. Spring was definitely here at last. That, too, should help to distract people from thoughts of locomotives breaking down at minus twenty degrees.

He rose, swaying a little — and not only because of the train's mo-

tion — and drew the curtains tight. He considered taking off his shoes and trousers and getting under the covers, but he wasn't feeling cold. Besides, there was still a lot of brandy left. That had been a very welcome surprise. Under the new dispensation it was becoming harder and harder to find. But Boris shared his fondness for it and had generously passed on part of the latest consignment he had received from Tbilisi — unofficially.

By the time the level had reduced to half, he was drowsy. Also he was finding it hard to replace the stopper. Treading out his last cigarette, he drew the blanket over him and switched off the light.

Within minutes, lulled by the slight rocking of the train, Pavel Dmitrovich Prokudin was fast asleep.

**W**ith a start, he realized he could no longer hear the rumble of the wheels on the track. The train was at a standstill. Moreover he was cold — bitterly, numbingly cold.

He forced his eyes open. He was still propped up on the two pillows, so he was gazing straight at the window on the far side. To his astonishment, it was daylight — or at any rate it wasn't night anymore. Under gleaming steel-gray clouds, he saw whiteness: the silhouettes of firs and birch trees laden to the uttermost with snow.

But where could this be? It ought

to be spring! It *was* spring! Anyway, who could have opened the curtains? Who had entered while he was asleep? Had he been robbed? He tried to swing his feet to the floor and stand up, but it was as though he were paralyzed, or rather, unbelievably weak — as though the effort of raising his eyelids had drained him of his entire remaining strength. He could not even reach for the brandy bottle.

Summoning all his force, he willed his head to turn, and managed to roll it far enough to look toward the other bed.

There was someone in it. Under not only a blanket, but a big, heavy cloth coat. Lying perfectly still. Even without his glasses, he could tell it was a woman, for tresses of long, dark hair trailed across her pillow.

Well, in that case—

He canceled the idea as soon as it entered his mind. Just such a foolish impulse was what had enabled him to put the necessary pressure on Boris. No! The important thing was, she had no business being in his compartment! Furious, he tried to shout at her, tell her to get out—

He produced not a sound, not even a whisper, but as if reading his thoughts, she moved. He saw her face with incredible clarity; at any distance over half a meter, he normally needed the help of his spectacles. She was young, slender and pretty, but as pale as the snow outside (how could

there be snow in such monstrous quantities, as though it were still February?), and her expression was of indescribable despair.

Rising very stiffly, as though every movement was as much of an effort for her as for him, she leaned on the doorframe and tugged at the handle. The sliding panel did not budge. In a sudden access of frustration, she began to hammer at it with small gloved fists, and abruptly Prokudin realized that her mouth was open. She looked as though she was screaming for help.

And yet the silence was absolute. He could not hear her cries; he had not heard her blows on the wood.

At last, shivering, her face twisted with sobs, she returned to the shelter of the bed, and once again lay motionless.

"Last trip for this lot, eh, Irina?" the *provodnitsa* said to her colleague from the next carriage, who had come in the small hours to share a snack of tea, black bread, and sausage.

"Yes, Olga, and it's about time. The new ones are marvelous, aren't they? As modern as an airplane, if not as fast." Irina chuckled at her own joke despite having made it a dozen times before. She added in a more serious tone, "I don't suppose you're sorry to see the back of this old thing, are you?"

"Not after being snowed up in it!" Olga confirmed with emphasis. "The breakdown wasn't so bad — I mean,

it was the middle of February and the worst winter for seven years, so one's resigned to that kind of thing occasionally. But when the snowplow broke down as well, and the drifts were piling up nearly to the windows, and the heating failed. . . . Even the water heater had gone out. I can't tell you how glad we were when they managed to clear the nearest road and dig a path for us. The sound of those trucks revving their engines — oh, it was like the music of angels! How lucky you were to be on leave! And then, of course, after that it took two days to free the train."

This, too, had been said a dozen times, but Irina still nodded sympathetically. And said after a pause, "Are you still having trouble with the door of that compartment?"

Olga sighed, sipping her tea. "I gave up on it," she said. "I told you I put in a fault report, but nobody took any notice — and why should they? Why repair something that's only a few weeks away from being junked? And it's not my business to fix that kind of thing, is it? I followed the proper procedure; and if nobody paid attention, it isn't up to me to carry the can. I had quite a row with the chief courier of this African trade delegation, you know."

"Yes, I noticed. What happened?"

"Well, they'd booked two of the Intourist people in the end compartment, in spite of my having reported the jammed door. They had to be

moved from soft to hard because there wasn't room anywhere else. He went on at me as though I were to blame, but I had my copy of the fault report, and I stood my ground. He had to give up eventually, of course, or be held responsible for delaying the train."

Irina tsk-tsked and refilled the tea-cups. She said after a pause, "Every time I think of that poor girl. . . ."

"How do you suppose I feel? I'm lucky to have kept my job, aren't I? But I pointed out that it was none of my doing if she chose to use a name like Sasha that could just as well be a man's, and what's more, with a foreign surname that doesn't have a proper feminine ending! Why didn't she call herself Alexandra, in full, so there wouldn't have been any mix-up?"

"Quite right," Irina concurred. "What's more, she should have married a nice Russian boy instead of — what did they say her husband was? Swedish? Finnish?"

"One or the other," Olga said dismissively. "Still, you can't help feeling sorry for him, can you?"

"No, I suppose not. They hadn't even had a chance to live together since they got married, had they? You're right: it must have been dreadful for him."

"He wasn't the only one," Olga said tartly, picking up the thread of her discourse. "She should have complained to me! I know what men are

like! I'd have sorted the nasty fellow out, no matter who he was! But I suppose she was too scared of being held up by some sort of police proceedings. So when she found the end compartment was vacant, she just moved in without reporting what she'd done. Oh, she brought trouble on her own head. My list didn't show anyone in that compartment — why should it occur to me to check it when all the ones I knew to be occupied were definitely empty? I mean, you rely on normal procedure even when you're stuck in a snowdrift waiting for rescue! And I did *my* duty! I was the last to leave the carriage, like a captain leaving his ship! Far as I knew, anyway!"

"Or course! But how she managed to sleep through all the commotion, that's what I'd like to know. They said they didn't find any sedative or sleeping pills."

"Ah, that did come out. I thought I'd already told you. She told a friend she could never sleep on a train, so this other girl gave her some tablets she'd been prescribed, just wrapped in a bit of paper. She got an almighty ticking-off, by the way! She had no business passing on any sort of medicine without a doctor's advice. And it was strong stuff, too, quite enough to knock out a little slip of a thing like that for twice as long as she expected."

"How awful it must have been for her when she woke up at twenty

below zero, and found the train was empty!"

"Yes. . . . Well, let's not think about it. It's over, and it can't be helped. But I can't avoid saying, you know, how much I'd like to get my hands on whoever was responsible for first the engine breaking down, and then the snowplow. And it was just a small part in each case — the sort of thing you'd never imagine could bring a whole huge machine to a dead stop."

"For all anyone can tell," said Irina sagely, "it could have been the same person who sent us those door catches that jam so easily. You know, when I was learning English, they taught us a saying about 'spoiling the ship for a kopeck's worth of tar.' Things never change, not really. . . . Well, time's a-wasting. I'll see you at the terminus."

And she went back to her own carriage, leaving Olga to brood anew over the tragedy.

**T**he train was rolling again. With a start of relief, Prokudin jolted awake. His mouth was dry, his belly sour, and he had a splitting headache. But the terrible paralysis had left him. So it had only been a nightmare after all!

What a nightmare, though! He had never had a worse one!

With trembling fingers, he opened the brandy and took a gulp. As he was replacing the stopper, it dawned on

him that the train was — yes — moving, but it was moving in the wrong direction.

Backward.

Fumbling for his glasses, he rushed to the window and dragged the curtains apart. There was morning mist outside, but thinning — and at least there was no sign of snow.

The view that met his gaze was familiar: sheds and workshops alongside one of the tracks running south from the Leningrad terminus. He cursed roundly. What had happened was instantly obvious: the stupid bitch of a *provodnitsa* hadn't bothered to wake him on arrival, and this carriage was being shunted to a siding. He could clearly hear the familiar racket of a shunting engine, so different from a long-haul locomotive.

That settled it! He was going to report her, whether or not she really was using a compartment with a supposedly jammed door to convey illicit goods. It was no more than she deserved!

The fact that according to her passenger list, this compartment was supposed to be empty, so there would have been no point in banging at the door to rouse its occupants, made in his view absolutely no difference. It was a disgraceful way to treat a senior railway official!

Worst of all: news of this mishap was bound to leak out, and he could just imagine how it would delight his colleagues — among whom he was



not entirely popular, what with his car, his larger-than-average apartment, his dacha, and his access to the Beriozka hard-currency shops, the fruit of years of such ingenious shifts as that little matter of entering recycled spare parts as though they were brand-new.

...

And to think that yesterday he had been in such high spirits!

He dragged on his jacket, coat, and hat, shut his suitcase, and reached for the handle of the door.

It was stuck.

He tugged until his arms ached. Then he battered on the wood and shouted at the top of his voice. Curiously, he seemed not to be making the proper amount of noise. The impact of his banging was faint, as though muffled by distance; so, incredibly, was the sound of his own voice.

Bewildered, he strode to the window. But by this time the carriage had reached its next-to-final destination. It stood alongside another, identical to it, completely empty. He could clearly make out that the beds had been stripped.

Furious, he sank down on his own bed again. Well, sooner or later someone would come down this carriage, too, collecting sheets and blankets and pillows. When they did, he wasn't half going to give them a piece of his mind!

For want of anything else — somehow he had smoked his entire packet of *papirosi* — he drank some more

brandy, mentally rehearsing the tongue-lashing he was going to administer when he caught up with that *provodnitsa*.

At last he heard footsteps coming along the corridor, accompanied by cheerful female voices. He resumed his hammering on the door, and shouted as loudly as he could.

His fists made no more noise than if they had been striking a cushion, and his shouts were softer than a waft of summer breeze.

One of the women tried the compartment door, and his heart leapt with excitement. But it failed to open, and someone called, "Don't bother with the end one! The catch is jammed — the *provodnitsa* left a note about it stuck to the door of her office."

"Right!"

And they were gone.

Incredulous, more than a little frightened, Prokudin looked at his brandy bottle. There was still quite a lot left in it — but all of sudden he was crazy with impatience, and anyway he had another bottle. If he couldn't get out by the door, there was always the window!

He spun around and hurled the bottle at the largest pane. The bottle smashed. The window stayed intact.

But through it, all of a sudden, he seemed to see once more that bleak midwinter landscape, this time partly obscured by a snowdrift that had risen halfway up the glass. He seemed to be gripped by the same biting chill; he

sensed, rather than saw, another presence here in the compartment, and knew that his fellow traveler was seeing, feeling, suffering the same: the cold, the fear, the dawning certainty of being trapped. . . .

Abruptly he realized whose that presence was.

Terrified, he seized the remaining bottle and drank from it as though it held plain water.

**A** week elapsed before the carriage made its last journey of all, to the scrapyard where it was to be broken up. Ahead of the team with cutting torches who came to attack its metal frame went husky young men with screwdrivers, spanners, hammers, and crowbars, reclaiming everything that might be reusable by somebody: coat hooks, lamps and bulbs, wooden paneling, hinges, curtain rods. . . .

Reaching the last compartment, a nineteen-year-old boy called Igor discovered that the door was stuck. He took a crowbar to it. When the catch gave way, he found a swarm of buzzing flies, and also . . . what they were feeding on.

"Comrade foreman!" he called in a weak voice, as soon as he had mastered the urge to bring up his breakfast.

"What is it?" the foreman said with a sigh, putting by his list of items to be reclaimed. And then: "Oh!"

He crossed himself by sheer reflex; then, recovering, went in.

"I saw worse than this when I was younger than you, during the Great Patriotic War!" he muttered. "Had quite a party here, didn't he — all by himself?" His heavy boots were crunching broken glass. "Looks as if he'd already finished one bottle before he got started on the second" — which lay empty in half-rotted hands.

"Let's find out who he was," he went on, pulling back the coat and jacket and searching for an inside pocket. He retrieved a wallet, slimy with corruption; he wiped it fastidiously on the coat's lapels before opening it.

And then he murmured, "Hmm! So that's what became of the dirty bastard! Everyone's been saying that he must have fled abroad so as not to have to face the music."

Igor, in the doorway, ventured, "You know who he is — I mean, was?"

The answer came in an impressive tone: "Pavel Dmitrovich Prokudin!"

Igor looked blank.

"Hah!" — with contempt. "It's plain you haven't been in your trade long! I thought everybody knew about Prokudin! He specialized in the sort of thing you're doing right now, except he wasn't doing it honestly and aboveboard."

"What do you mean?" Igor had so far recovered his self-possession as to advance a pace or two, his horrified

but fascinated gaze fixed on the corpse's bloated, decaying face. Flies had found the eyes and nostrils, and the open mouth, especially attractive.

"He fixed the paperwork to make it look as though used parts had been delivered new from the factory. I don't suppose that was the only trick he got up to, but it was probably the one that got him all sorts of things he didn't deserve."

Realization dawned.

"Oh! Was he the guy they said was likely to be investigated?"

"That's right."

"Because he was being — well, blatant?"

"Oh, not just that" — with a dismissive gesture. "Remember the time the Krasnaya Strela got stuck because

the loco broke down, and then the snowplow broke down as well while it was clearing the way for a replacement engine? Fine state of affairs! One of our crack trains stranded in the middle of nowhere! Heads were bound to roll for letting that happen!"

Igor bridled a little. "Of course I remember! That was only two or three months ago. And didn't someone get left behind when they had to evacuate the passengers by bus?"

"Bus?" The foreman gave a sour grin. "They couldn't get buses through to it. They had to call out army trucks. But — yes, that was the worst part of the scandal hanging over this son of a bitch. Some girl or other who'd married a Finn had finally got permission to join him, and she was on her way,

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only she'd taken a sedative, and slept right through the clearance of the train."

"You mean nobody knew she was on board?" Igor burst out.

"The way I heard it, she moved herself into an empty compartment because by mistake she'd been put in with a man. Presumably he was making a nuisance of himself, only she didn't dare file a complaint for fear of being kept away from her husband even longer. Beside, rumor has it that the guy in question was a crony of Prokudin's. But I don't know for sure. Who does? You don't read authoritative accounts of this kind of thing in *Trud*, do you? What I *do* know is the reason for the two breakdowns; I had it straight from

a pal of mine in locomotive maintenance. Both the engine and the snowplow had been fitted with used parts that Prokudin told the inventory clerks to list as new ones."

Igor looked properly shocked.

"How on earth did he get away with it?"

"When you've spent thirty years cultivating friends in high places, and maybe sometimes keeping quiet about matters they would rather not have noised abroad, you can get away with quite a lot, or so I'm told. At all events," the foreman concluded, "he finally seems to have got his comupance. I wonder how. . . . Never mind. We'd better go and phone for the *militsiya*."

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# The Boy Who Plaited Manes

BY  
NANCY SPRINGER

**T**he boy who plaited the manes of horses came, fittingly enough, on the day of the Midsummer Hunt: when he was needed worst, though Wald the head groom did not yet know it. The stable was in a muted frenzy of work, as it had been since long before dawn, every groom and apprentice vehemently polishing. The lord's behest was that all the horses in his stable should be brushed for two hours every morning to keep the fine shine and bloom on their flanks, and this morning could be no different. Then there was also all the gear to be tended to. Though old Lord Robley of Auberon was a petty manor lord, with only some hundred of horses and less than half the number of grooms to show for a lifetime's striving, his lowly status made him all the more keen to present himself and his retinue grandly before the more powerful

lords who would assemble for the Hunt. Himself and his retinue and his lovely young wife.

Therefore it was an eerie thing when the boy walked up the long stable aisle past men possessed with work, men so frantic they took no notice at all of the stranger, up the aisle brick-paved in chevron style until he came to the stall where the lady's milk-white palfrey stood covered withers to croup with a fitted sheet tied on to keep the beast clean, and the boy swung open the heavy stall door and walked in without fear, as if he belonged there, and went up to the palfrey to plait its mane.

He was an eerie boy, so thin that he seemed deformed, and of an age difficult to guess because of his thinness. He might have been ten, or he might have been seventeen with something wrong about him that

made him beardless and narrow-shouldered and thin. His eyes seemed too gathered for a ten-year-old, gray-green and calm yet feral, like woodland. His hair, dark and shaggy, seemed to bulk large above his thin, thin face.

The palfrey's hair was far better cared for than his. Its silky mane, coddled for length, hung down below its curved neck, and its tail was bundled into a wrapping, to be let down at the last moment before the lady rose, when it would trail on the ground and float like a white bridal train. The boy did not yet touch the tail, but his thin fingers flew to work on the palfrey's mane.

Wald the head groom, passing nearly at a run to see to the saddling of the lord's hotblooded hunter, stopped in his tracks and stared. And to be sure it was not that he had never seen plaiting before. He himself had probably braided a thousand horses' manes, and he knew what a time it took to put even a row of small looped braids along a horse's crest, and how hard it was to get them even, and how horsehair seems like a demon with a mind of its own. He frankly gawked, and other grooms stood beside him and did likewise, until more onlookers stood gathered outside the palfrey's stall than could rightly see, and those in the back demanded to know what was happening, and those in the front seemed not to hear them, but stood as if in a

trance, watching the boy's thin, swift hands.

For the boy's fingers moved more quickly and deftly than seemed human, than seemed possible, each hand by itself combing and plaiting a long, slender braid in one smooth movement, as if he no more than stroked the braid out of the mane. That itself would have been wonder enough, as when a groom is so apt that he can curry with one hand and follow after with the brush in the other, and have a horse done in half the time. A shining braid forming out of each hand every minute, wonder enough — but that was the least of it. The boy interwove them as he worked, so that they flowed into each other in a network, making of the mane a delicate shawl, a veil, that draped the palfrey's fine neck. The ends of the braids formed a silky hem curving down to a point at the shoulder, and at the point the boy spiraled the remaining mane into an uncanny horsehair flower. And all the time, though it was not tied and was by no means a cold-blooded beast, the palfrey had not moved, standing still as stone.

Then Wald the head groom felt fear prickling at the back of his astonishment. The boy had carried each plait down to the last three hairs. Yet he had fastened nothing with thread or ribbon, but merely pressed the ends between two fingers, and the braids stayed as he had placed them. Nor did the braids ever seem to fall

loose as he was working, or hairs fly out at random, but all lay smooth as white silk, shimmering. The boy, or whatever he was, stood still with his hands at his sides, admiring his work.

Uncanny. Still, the lord and lady would be well pleased. . . . Wald jerked himself out of amazement and moved quickly. "Get back to your work, you fellows!" he roared at the grooms, and then he strode into the stall.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What do you mean coming in here like this?" It was best, in a lord's household, never to let anyone know you were obliged to them.

The boy looked at him silently, turning his head in the alert yet indifferent way of a cat.

"I have asked you a question! What is your name?"

The boy did not speak, or even move his lips. Then or thereafter, as long as he worked in that stable, he never made any sound.

His stolid manner annoyed Wald. But though the master groom could not yet know that the boy was a mute, he saw something odd in his face. A halfwit, perhaps. He wanted to strike the boy, but even worse he wanted the praise of the lord and lady, so he turned abruptly and snatched the wrapping off the palfrey's tail, letting the cloud of white hair float down to the clean straw of the stall. "Do something with that," he snapped.

A sweet, intense glow came into

the boy's eyes as he regarded his task. With his fingers he combed the hair smooth, and then he started a row of small braids above the bone.

Most of the tail he left loose and flowing, with just a cluster of braids at the top, a few of them swinging halfway to the ground. And young Lady Aelynn gasped with pleasure when she saw them, and with wonder at the mane, even though she was a lord's daughter born and not unaccustomed to finery.

It did not matter, that day, that Lord Robley's saddle had not been polished to a sufficient shine. He was well pleased with his grooms. Nor did it matter that his hawks flew poorly, his hounds were unruly and his clumsy hunter stumbled and cut its knees. Lords and ladies looked again and again at his young wife on her white palfrey, its tail trailing and shimmering like her blue silk gown, the delicate openwork of its mane as dainty as the lace kerchief tucked between her breasts or her slender gloved hand that held the caparisoned reins. Every hair of her mount was as artfully placed as her own honey-gold hair looped in gold-beaded curls atop her fair young head. Lord Robley knew himself to be the envy of everyone who saw him for the sake of his lovely wife and the showing she made on her white mount with the plaited mane.

And when the boy who plaited manes took his place among the lord's

other servants in the kitchen line for the evening meal, no one gainsaid him.

Lord Robley was a hard old man, his old body hard and hale, his spirit hard. It took him less than a day to pass from being well pleased to being greedy for more: no longer was it enough that the lady's palfrey should go forth in unadorned braids. He sent a servant to Wald with silk ribbons in the Auberon colors, dark blue and crimson, and commanded that they should be plaited into the palfrey's mane and tail. This the stranger boy did with ease when Wald ordered him to, and he used the ribbon ends to tie tiny bows and love knots and leave a few shimmering tendrils bobbing in the forelock. Lady Aelynn was enchanted.

Within a few days Lord Robley had sent to the stable thread of silver and of gold, strings of small pearls, tassels, pendant jewels, and fresh-cut flowers of every sort. All of these things the boy who plaited manes used with ease to dress the lady's palfrey when he was bid. Lady Aelynn went forth to the next hunt with tiny bells of silver and gold chiming at the tip of each of her mount's dainty ribbon-decked braids, and eyes turned her way wherever she rode. Nor did the boy ever seem to arrange the mane and tail and forelock twice in the same way, but whatever way he chose to plait and weave and dress it

seemed the most perfect and poignant and heartachingly beautiful way a horse had ever been arrayed. Once he did the palfrey's entire mane in one great, thick braid along the crest, gathering in the hairs as he went, so that the neck seemed to arch as mightily as a destrier's, and he made the braid drip thick with flowers, roses and great lilies and spires of larkspur trailing down, so that the horse seemed to go with a mane of flowers. But another time he would leave the mane loose and floating, with just a few braids shimmering down behind the ears or in the forelock, perhaps, and this also seemed perfect and poignant and the only way a horse should be adorned.

Nor was it sufficient, any longer, that merely the lady's milk-white palfrey should go forth in braids. Lord Robley commanded that his hot-blooded hunter also should have his mane done up in stubby ribboned braids and rosettes in the Auberon colors, and the horses of his retinue likewise, though with lesser rosettes. And should his wife choose to go out riding with her noble guests, all their mounts were to be prepared like hers, though in lesser degree.

All these orders Wald passed on to the boy who plaited manes, and the youngster readily did as he was bid, working sometimes from before dawn until long after dark, and never seeming to want more than what food he could eat while standing in



the kitchen. He slept in the hay and straw of the loft and did not use even a horseblanket for covering until one of the grooms threw one on him. Nor did he ask for clothing, but Wald, ashamed of the boy's shabbiness, provided him with the clothing due to a servant. The master groom said nothing to him of a servant's pay. The boy seemed content without it. Probably he would have been content without the clothing as well. Though in fact it was hard to tell what he was thinking or feeling, for he never spoke and his thin face seldom moved.

No one knew his name, the boy who plaited manes. Though many of the grooms were curious and made inquiries, no one could tell who he was or where he had come from. Or even what he was, Wald thought sourly. No way to tell if the young snip was a halfwit or a bastard or what, if he would not talk. No way to tell what sort of a young warlock he might be, that the horses never moved under his hands, even the hotblooded hunter standing like a stump for him. Scrawny brat. He could hear well enough; why would he not talk?

It did not make Wald like the strange boy, that he did at once whatever he was told and worked so hard and so silently. In particular he did not like the boy for doing the work for which Wald reaped the lord's praise; Wald disliked anyone to whom he was obliged. Nor did he like the way the boy had arrived, as if blown

in on a gust of wind, and so thin that it nearly seemed possible. Nor did he like the thought that any day the boy might leave in like wise. And even disliking that thought, Wald could not bring himself to give the boy the few coppers a week which were his due, for he disliked the boy more. Wald believed there was something wrongheaded, nearly evil, about the boy. His face seemed wrong, so very thin, with the set mouth and the eyes both wild and quiet, burning like a steady candle flame.

Summer turned into autumn, and many gusts of wind blew, but the boy who plaited manes seemed content to stay, and if he knew of Wald's dislike he did not show it. In fact he showed nothing. He braided the palfrey's mane with autumn starflowers and smiled ever so slightly as he worked. Autumn turned to the first dripping and dismal, chill days of winter. The boy used bunches of bright feathers instead of flowers when he dressed the palfrey's mane, and he did not ask for a winter jerkin, so Wald did not give him any. It was seldom enough, anyway, that the horses were used for pleasure at this season. The thin boy could spend his days huddled under a horseblanket in the loft.

Hard winter came, and the smallpox season.

Lady Aelynn was bored in the wintertime, even more so than during the rest of the year. At least in the

fine weather there were walks outside, there were riding and hunting and people to impress. It would not be reasonable for a lord's wife, nobly born (though a younger child, and female), to wish for more than that. Lady Aelynn knew full well that her brief days of friendships and courtships were over. She had wed tolerably well, and Lord Robley counted her among his possessions, a beautiful thing to be prized like his gold and his best horses. He was a manor lord, and she was his belonging, his lady, and not for others to touch even with their regard. She was entirely his. So there were walks for her in walled gardens, and pleasure riding and hunting by her lord's side, and people to impress.

But in the wintertime there were not even the walks. There was nothing for the Lady Aelynn to do but tend to her needlework and her own beauty, endlessly concerned with her clothes, her hair, her skin, even though she was so young, no more than seventeen — for she knew in her heart that it was for her beauty that Lord Robley smiled on her, and for no other reason. And though she did not think of it, she knew that her life lay in his grasping hands.

Therefore she was ardently uneasy, and distressed only for herself, when the woman who arranged her hair each morning was laid abed with smallpox. Though as befits a lady of rank, Aelynn hid her dismay in vexa-

tion. And it did not take her long to discover that none of her other tiring-women could serve her nearly as well.

"Mother of God!" she raged, surveying her hair in the mirror for perhaps the tenth time. "The groom who plaits the horses' manes in the stable could do better!" Then the truth of her own words struck her, and desperation made her willing to be daring. She smiled. "Bring him hither!"

Her women stammered and curtseyed and fled to consult among themselves and exclaim with the help in the kitchen. After some few minutes of this, a bold kitchen maid was dispatched to the stable and returned with a shivering waif: the boy who plaited manes.

It was not to be considered that such a beggar should go in to the lady. Her tiring-women squeaked in horror and made him bathe first, in a washbasin before the kitchen hearth, for there was a strong smell of horse and stable about him. They ordered him to scrub his own hair with strong soap and scent himself with lavender, and while some of them giggled and fled, others giggled and stayed, to pour water for him and see that he made a proper job of his ablutions. All that was demanded of him the boy who plaited manes did without any change in his thin face, any movement of his closed mouth, any flash of his feral eyes. At last they brought him clean clothing, jerkin and woolen

hose only a little too large, and pulled the things as straight as they could on him, and took him to the tower where the lady waited.

He did not bow to the Lady Aelynn or look into her eyes for his instructions, but his still mouth softened a little and his glance, calm and alert, like that of a woodland thing, darted to her hair. And at once, as if he could scarcely wait, he took his place behind her and lifted her tresses in his hands. Such a soft, fine, honey-colored mane of hair as he had never seen, and combs of gold and ivory lying at hand on a rosewood table, and ribbons of silk and gold, everything he could have wanted, his for the sake of his skill.

He started at the forehead, and the lady sat as if in a trance beneath the deft touch of his hands.

Gentle, he was so gentle, she had never felt such a soft and gentle touch from any man, least of all from her lord. When Lord Robley wanted to use one of his possessions he seized it, not so hard as to hurt, but still firmly enough to take control. But this boy touched her as gently as a woman, no, a mother, for no tiring-woman or maid had ever gentled her so. . . . Yet unmistakably his was the touch of a man, though she could scarcely have told how she knew. Part of it was power, she could feel the gentle power in his touch, she could feel — uncanny, altogether eerie and uncanny, what she was feel-

ing. It was as if his quick fingers called to her hair in soft command and her hair obeyed just for the sake of the one quick touch, all the while longing to embrace. . . . She stayed breathlessly still for him, like the horses.

He plaited her hair in braids thin as bluebell stems, only a wisp of hairs to each braid, one after another with both his deft hands as if each was as easy as a caress, making them stay with merely a touch of two fingers at the end, until all her hair lay in a silky cascade of them, catching the light and glimmering and swaying like a rich drapery when he made her move her head. Some of them he gathered and looped and tied up with the ribbons which matched her dress, blue edged with gold. But most of them he left hanging to her bare back and shoulders. He surveyed his work with just a whisper of a smile when he was done, then turned and left without waiting for the lady's nod, and she sat as if under a spell and watched his thin back as he walked away. Then she tossed her head at his lack of courtesy. But the swinging of her hair pleased her.

She had him back to dress her hair the next day, and the next, and many days thereafter. And so that they would not have to be always bathing him, her tiring-women found him a room within the manorhouse doors, and a pallet and clean blankets, and a change of clothing, plain coarse cloth-

ing, such a servants wore. They trimmed the heavy hair that shadowed his eyes, also, but he looked no less the oddling with his thin, thin face and his calm burning glance and his mouth that seemed scarcely ever to move. He did as he was bid, whether by Wald or the lady or some kitchen maid, and every day he plaited Lady Aelynn's hair differently. One day he shaped it all into a bright crown of braids atop her head. On other days he would plait it close to her head so that the tendrils caressed her neck, or in a haughty crest studded with jewels, or in a single soft feathered braid at one side. He always left her tower chamber at once, never looking at the lady to see if he had pleased her, as if he knew that she would always be pleased.

Always, she was.

Things happened. The tiring-woman who had taken smallpox died of it, and Lady Aelynn did not care, not for the sake of her cherished hair and most certainly not for the sake of the woman herself. Lord Robley went away on a journey to discipline a debt-or vassal, and Lady Aelynn did not care except to be glad, for there was a sure sense growing in her of what she would do.

When even her very tresses were enthralled by the touch of this oddling boy, longing to embrace him, could she be otherwise?

When next he had plaited her mane of honey-colored hair and

turned to leave her without a glance, she caught him by one thin arm. His eyes met hers with a steady, gathered look. She stood — she was taller than he, and larger, though she was as slender as any maiden. It did not matter. She took him by one thin hand and led him to her bed, and there he did as he was bid.

Nor did he disappoint her. His touch — she had never been touched so softly, so gently, so deftly, with such power. Nor was he lacking in manhood, for all that he was as thin and hairless as a boy. And his lips, after all, knew how to move, and his tongue. But it was the touch of his thin hands that she hungered for, the gentle, tender, potent touch that thrilled her almost as if — she were loved. . . .

He smiled at her afterward, slightly, softly, a whisper of a smile in the muted half-light of her curtained bed, and his lips moved.

"You are swine," he said, "all of you nobles."

And he got up, put on his plain, coarse clothing and left her without a backward glance.

It terrified Lady Aelynn, that he was not truly a mute. Terrified her even more than what he had said, though she burned with mortified wrath whenever she thought of the latter. He, of all people, a mute, to speak such words to her and leave her helpless to avenge herself. . . .

Perhaps for that reason he would not betray her. She had thought it would be safe to take a mute as her lover. . . . Perhaps he would not betray her.

In fact, it was not he who betrayed her to her lord, but Wald.

Her tiring-women suspected, perhaps because she had sent them on such a long errand. She had not thought they would suspect — who would think that such a wisp of a beardless boy could be a bedfellow? But perhaps they also had seen the wild glow deep in his gray-green eyes. They whispered among themselves and with the kitchen maids, and the bold kitchen maid giggled with the grooms, and Wald heard.

Even though the boy who plaited manes did it all, Wald considered the constant plaiting and adorning of manes and tails a great bother. The whole fussy business offended him, he had decided, and he had long since forgotten the few words of praise it had garnered from the lord at first. Moreover, he disliked the boy so vehemently that he was not thinking clearly. It seemed to him that he could be rid of the boy and the wretched onus of braids and rosettes all in one stroke. The day the lord returned from his journey, Wald hurried to him, begged private audience, bowed low and made his humble report.

Lord Robley heard him in icy silence, for he knew pettiness when he saw it; it had served him often in the

past, and he would punish it if it misled him. He summoned his wife to question her. But the Lady Aelynn's hair hung lank, and her guilt and shame could be seen plainly in her face from the moment she came before him.

Lord Robley's roar could be heard even to the stables.

He strode over to her where she lay crumpled and weeping on his chamber floor, lifted her head by its honey-gold hair and slashed her across the face with his sword. Then he left her screaming and stinging her wound with fresh tears, and he strode to the stable with his bloody sword still drawn, Wald fleeing before him all the way; when the lord burst in all the grooms were scattered but one. The boy Wald had accused stood plaiting the white palfrey's mane.

Lord Robley hacked the palfrey's head from its braid-bedecked neck with his sword, and the boy who plaited manes stood by with something smoldering deep in his unblinking gray-green eyes, stood calmly waiting. If he had screamed and turned to flee, Lord Robley would with great satisfaction have given him a coward's death from the back. But it unnerved the lord that the boy awaited his pleasure with such mute — what? Defiance? There was no servant's boy in this one, no falling to the soiled straw, no groveling. If he had groveled he could have been kicked, stabbed, killed out of hand,

also. . . . But this silent, watchful waiting, like the alertness of a wild thing — on the hunt or being hunted? It gave Lord Robley pause, like the pause of the wolf before the standing stag or the pause of the huntsman before the thicketed boar. He held the boy at the point of his sword — though no such holding was necessary, for the prisoner had not moved even to tremble — and roared for his men-at-arms to come take the boy to the dungeon.

There the nameless stranger stayed without water or food, and aside from starving him Lord Robley could not decide what to do with him.

At first the boy who plaited manes paced in his prison restlessly — he had that freedom, for he was so thin and small that the shackles were too large to hold him. Later he lay in a scant bed of short straw and stared narrow-eyed at the darkness. And yet later, seeing the thin cascades of moonlight flow down through the high, iron-barred window and puddle in moon-glades on the stone floor, he got up and began to plait the moonbeams.

They were far finer than any horse-hair, moonbeams, finer even than the lady's honey-colored locks, and his eyes grew wide with wonder and pleasure as he felt them. He made them into braids as fine as silk threads, flowing together into a lacework as close as woven cloth, and when he had reached as high as he could,

plaiting, he stroked as if combing a long mane with his fingers and pulled more moonlight down out of sky — for this stuff was not like any other stuff he had even worked with, it slipped and slid worse than any hair, there seemed to be no beginning or end to it except the barriers that men put in its way. He stood plaiting the fine, thin plaits until he had raised a shimmering heap on the floor, and then he stepped back and allowed the moon to move on. His handiwork he laid carefully aside in a corner.

The boy who plaited moonbeams did not sleep, but sat watching for the dawn, his eyes glowing greenly in the darkened cell. He saw the sky lighten beyond the high window and waited stolidly, as the wolf waits for the gathering of the pack, as a wildcat waits for the game to pass along the trail below the rock where it lies. Not until the day had neared its mid did the sun's rays, thrust through the narrow spaces between the high bars, wheel their shafts down to where he could reach them. Then he got up and began to plait the sunlight.

Guards were about, or more alert, in the daytime, and they gathered at the heavy door of his prison, peering in between the iron bars of its small window, gawking and quarreling with each other for turns. They watched his unwavering eyes, saw the slight smile come on his face as he worked, though his thin hands glowed red as if seen through fire. They saw the

shining mound he raised on the floor, and whispered among themselves and did not know what to do, for none of them dared to touch it or him. One of them requested a captain to come look. And the captain summoned the steward, and the steward went to report to the lord. And from outside the cries began to sound that the sun was standing still.

After the boy had finished, he stood back and let the sun move on, then sat resting on his filthy straw. Within minutes the dungeon door burst open and Lord Robley himself strode in.

Lord Robley had grown weary of mutilating his wife, and he had not yet decided what to do with his other prisoner. Annoyed by the reports from the prison, he expected that an idea would come to him when he saw the boy. He entered with drawn sword. But all thoughts of the thin young body before him were sent whirling away from his mind by what he saw laid out on the stone floor at his feet.

A mantle, a kingly cloak — but no king had ever owned such a cloak. All shining, the outside of it silver and the inside gold — but no, to call it silver and gold was to insult it. More like water and fire, flow and flame, shimmering as if it moved, as if it were alive, and yet it had been made by hands, he could see the workmanship, so fine that every thread was worth a gasp of pleasure, the outside of it somehow braided and plaited to

the lining, and all around the edge a fringe of threads like bright fur so fine that it wavered in the air like flame. Lord Robley had no thought but to settle the fiery gleaming thing on his shoulders, to wear that glory and be finer than any king. He seized it and flung it on—

And screamed as he had not yet made his wife scream, with the shriek of mortal agony. His whole hard body glowed as if it had been placed in a furnace. His face contorted, and he fell dead.

The boy who plaited sunbeams got up in a quiet, alert way and walked forward, as noiseless on his feet as a lynx. He reached down and took the cloak off the body of the lord, twirled it and placed it on his own shoulders, and it did not harm him. But in that cloak he seemed insubstantial, like something moving in moonlight and shadow, something nameless roaming in the night. He walked out of the open dungeon door, between the guards clustered there, past the lord's retinue and the steward, and they all shrank back from him, flattened themselves against the stone walls of the corridor so as not to come near him. No one dared take hold of him or try to stop him. He walked out through the courtyard, past the stable, and out the manor gates with the settled air of one whose business is done. The men-at-arms gathered atop the wall and watched him go.

Wald the master groom lived to

old age sweating every night with terror, and died of a weakened heart in the midst of a nightmare. Nothing else but his own fear harmed him. The boy who plaited — mane of sun, mane of moon — was never seen

again in that place, except that children sometimes told the tale of having glimpsed him in the wild heart of a storm, plaiting the long lashes of wind and rain.



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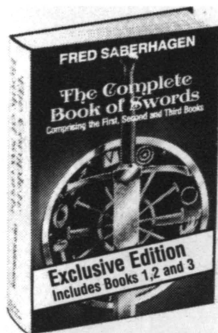
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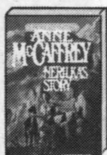


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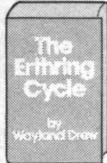
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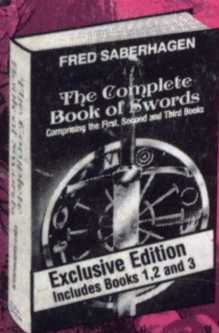
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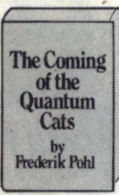
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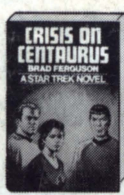
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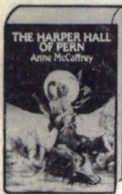
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